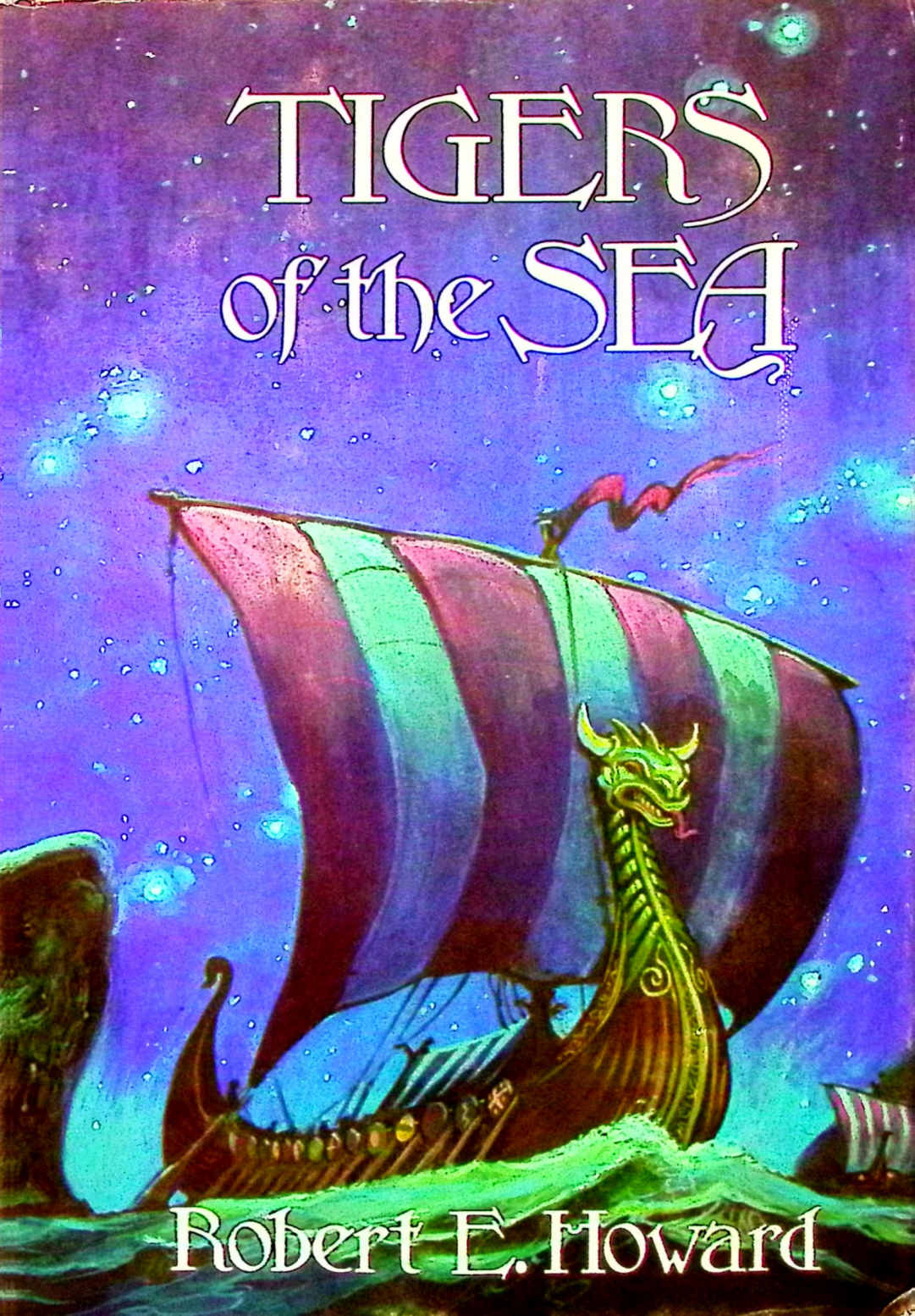
TIGERS of the SEA



Robert E. Howard

$6.00

TIGERS of the SEA

Robert E. Howard

Cormac Mac Art . . . called *an Cluiun* . . . the Wolf . . . Cormac is a Gaelic renegade and pirate who ranged the seas of Britain with the Danish Viking, Wulfhere the Skull-splitter in the days of King Arthur.

Like most of Howard's heroes, Cormac is black-haired, with steel-grey eyes and thews of fire and steel. In that Howard-fashioned genealogy provided for the Gaels, Cormac is descendant of other heroes from time-forgotten lands of Cimmeria and Atlantis and molded in the tradition of Conan and Kull.

Four stories of Cormac Mac Art have survived from Howard's lifetime, and of these only "The Night of the Wolf" has been published previously. "Tigers of the Sea," the title story and the longest of the four is an excellent and typical REH yarn. Rome has fallen, and Britain has been split into three Celtic kingdoms who are assailed endlessly by Angles, Saxons, and Jutes. When King Gerinth's sister is stolen, Cormac becomes involved with sea kings, his kinsfolk of Dalriadia, and the author's old favorites, the Picts.

"The Temple of Abomination" is the only story with an out-and-out supernatural theme. Cormac and Wulfhere chance upon an ancient temple that houses a horned, fanged and taloned race. "Swords of the Northern Sea" is a tale of conflict between rival factions. In "The Night of the Wolf," a tale in which the Picts return, Thorwald Shield-hewer holds a royal captive against Cormac and Wulfhere in the Shetland Islands.

TIGERS OF THE SEA was edited by Richard L. Tierney and illustrated by Tim Kirk.

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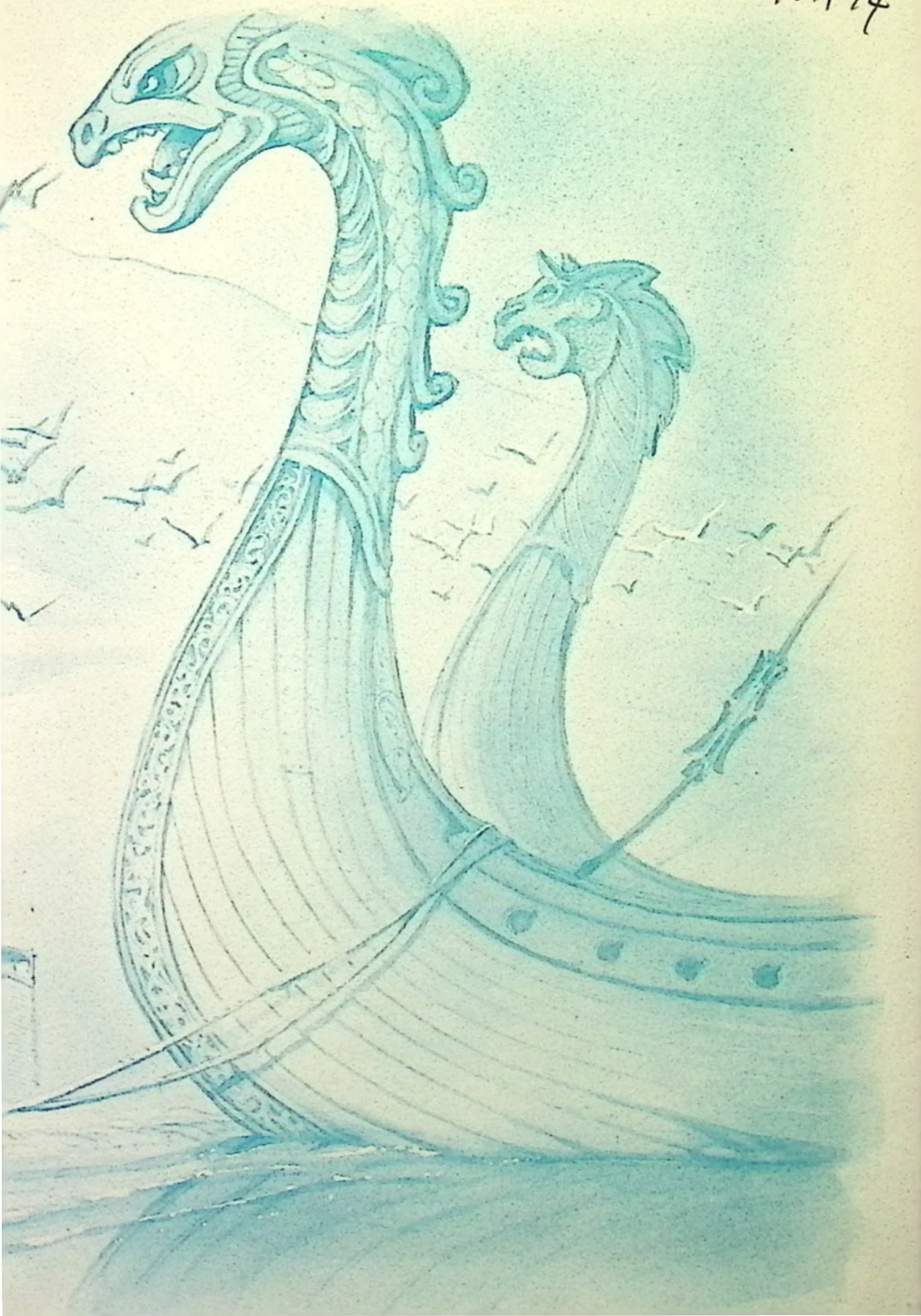

KIRK
TIGERS·OF·THE·SEA

TIGERS of the SEA

Robert E. Howard

EDITED BY RICHARD L. TIERNEY

ILLUSTRATED BY TIM KIRK

DONALD M. GRANT, Publisher
West Kingston, Rhode Island
1974

TIGERS OF THE SEA

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TIGERS of the SEA

INTRODUCTION

One of the most astounding literary phenomena of this century is Robert E. Howard (1906—1936) who, despite the disadvantage of living his entire short life in or near the dusty little village of Cross Plains, Texas—over a thousand miles from any of his literary peers in the genre of fantastic fiction—nevertheless produced a considerable body of inspiring fantasy-epic prose and poetry. Perhaps his very isolation helped spur his keen and colorful imagination in a frantic search for relief from the bucolic drabness around him; at any rate, the fast-moving adventures he contributed to the pulp magazines of the '20's and '30's are definitely among the best of their kind, equal to the creations of such masters as Burroughs and Merritt in engrossing the reader in the excitement of the plot or evoking wonder through the depiction of strange ages and lost empires, and second to none in their display of a heroic, poetic writing-style that

derives from a line of epic bards extending from Robert Service back to Homer. Howard was first of all a poet in the heroic tradition, and a few of his tales deserved to be considered modern classics in that field.

In his article, "Robert E. Howard: The Other Heroes" *(Etchings and Odysseys* #2, 1973), Ted Pons states: "Most readers tend to associate Robert E. Howard with his four principal creations: Conan, Solomon Kane, Kull of Atlantis, and the Pictish tribal king Bran Mak Morn. . . . Not to be forgotten, however, are the *other* heroes: those other characters in the weird genre who also sprang to life from Howard's fertile imagination and talented pen . . . " One such character is the hero of this collection of tales: Cormac Mac Art, the Gaelic renegade and pirate who roved and slew with the Vikings in the days of King Arthur.

Howard seems to have had a preference for heroes with a strong Gaelic strain in their ancestry. All his protagonists tended to be vital and muscular to a superlative degree, to be sure, but his Gaelic heroes had a depth of character development and a certain intensity that set them apart. Howard himself had a strong Irish strain in his ancestry and identified heavily with it. Also, he very often used the idea of reincarnation in his tales—though it is doubtful that he took the idea very seriously, and probably used it for

its poetic effect only. Still, it is tempting to think that Howard—himself a muscular, dark-haired man over six feet in height, like most of his heroes—may have toyed with the notion that the heroic figures blossoming so readily into his imagination were his own previous incarnations.

Just for fun, let's examine this notion. Howard's favorite hero-type is a tall, rangy, wolf-like warrior of pure Gaelic ancestry—blue-eyed but with a rather swarthy complexion, black-maned and with a scarred, somewhat sinister countenance; he is always a barbarian, neither giving nor expecting quarter in open battle, but possessing a concealed, innate chivalry or basic decency that keeps him from being downright cruel. Cormac Mac Art fits into this type precisely.

So also do Howard's mightiest epic-heroes, King Kull of Atlantis and Conan the Cimmerian. Kull, a barbarian from the island-continent of Atlantis, wins to the throne of Valusia—the mightiest kingdom of what then corresponded to the continent of Europe—through his skill with the sword and the might of his own steely thews; all this took place 100,000 years ago, if one is to believe the utterances of the old Pictish priest Gonar in one of Howard's finest tales, "Kings of the Night." Ages later, about 18,000 B.C., Atlantis sank and terrific cataclysms changed the face of the world; the Hyporian Age came into being, its glam-

orous civilization rising only after long millennia of barbarism following the cataclysms. Eventually, Conan the Cimmerian—a black-maned, muscular, scar-faced hero like Kull—wins to the throne of Aquilonia, mightiest of the Hyborian nations. In "The Hyborian Age," an elaborate article Howard penned to detail the background for his Kull and Conan stories, it is stated that "North of Aquilonia . . . are the Cimmerians, ferocious savages . . .; they are the descendants of the Atlanteans . . ." Thus Conan turns out to be of the same basic racial strain as Kull. Finally, near the end of his article, after describing the destruction of the Hyborian Age, Howard states: "The Gaels, ancestors of the Irish and Highland Scotch, descended from pure-blooded Cimmerian clans." Thus a racial link is established between Kull of Atlantis, Conan of Cimmeria and the various black-maned, sinister-faced Gaelic heroes of Howard's who rove and slay within the framework of more-or-less known history.

Perhaps the earliest of these "historical-Cimmerian" heroes is Conan of the reavers, who appears in the tale "People of the Dark." Raiding a village on the west coast of Britain with his fellow reavers from Erin, Conan pursues into the forest a blond girl who has excited his primitive lust—and finds himself battling in her behalf the horrid, semi-human "Little People" (so well depicted first in mod-

ern horror-fiction by Arthur Machen and later elaborated on by Howard). Conan of the reavers, like his Cimmerian predecessor, seems to have little on his mind but satisfying his brutish appetites, though a primitive chivalry comes to the fore in him when the chips are down; King Kull, on the other hand, often displayed a melancholy, philosophical temperament—a brooding wonderment that wrestled with the problems of what the universe was all about.

Conan of the reavers, judging from internal evidence, probably ranged the British Isles sometime during the first millenium B.C., before the coming of the Roman legions to the isles. Cormac of Connacht, the next Gaelic hero-figure in the series, appears at the time of the final military defeat that breaks the power of Rome in Britain. Actually Cormac is more of an observer than a hero, for the real hero at this time is Bran Mak Morn, king of the Picts. Cormac is a major figure in "Kings of the Night," perhaps Howard's greatest tale of epic heroism, in which the mighty King Kull comes out of the past to aid the people of the heather in smashing the overbearing legions of Rome; the only other story mentioning Cormac is "Worms of the Earth," in which Bran Mak Morn induces the Little People to aid him in the destruction of a cruel and overweening Roman general. (Incidentally, I think an amalgamation of these two Bran Mak Morn tales would make an epic movie worthy of Cecil B.

deMille—with someone like Jack Palance playing the part of the Gaelic hero Cormac of Connacht....)

Not long after Bran and Cormac smashed the Roman legions in Britain, Rome itself fell to the Goths and the Empire was at an end. The British Isles slowly reverted to the bronze-age savagery of the Dark Ages as Pict, Gael, Saxon and Jute strove with the semi-Romanized Britons for supremacy, while the first trickle of Viking activity began to be felt from the north. It was during this period, renowned in semi-mythical history for the exploits of King Arthur, that the hero of this book flourished—Cormac Mac Art. Cormac is a hero out of the standard cloth—"a tall, rangily built man, deepchested and strong," with "square-cut black hair and dark, smooth face ... This man's eyes were narrow slits and of a cold-steel grey, and they, with a number of scars that marred his face, lent him a peculiarly sinister aspect." Cormac is an outcast Irish sea-rover who ranges with the Danish Viking, Wulfhere the Skull-splitter.

Four tales of Cormac Mac Art are known to exist. Except for "The Night of the Wolf," which appeared in the Dell paperback collection *Bran Mak Morn*, they are published in this collection for the first time. I have arranged these four tales in what I think is as logical an order as may be inferred from the internal evidence. In "The Temple of Abomination" (evidently the earliest attempt of Howard's concerning this hero, and the

only tale in the series having a supernatural theme) Cormac states to Wulfhere: "Alaric led his Goths through the Forum fifty years ago, yet you barbarians still start at the name of Rome. Fear not; there are no legions in Britain." He goes on to say that "most of the chiefs are gathering about Arthur Pendragon for a great concerted drive"—against the Saxons. "The Night of the Wolf," which I have placed third in the series, ends with Cormac and Wulfhere escaping with their crew in a long ship called the *Raven,* which is the name of their ship in the fourth tale, "Tigers of the Sea." Now, in 'Tigers" there is a discrepancy: Cormac states in this tale that "Some eighty years ago ... Alaric and his Goths sacked the imperial city"—implying that thirty years have passed since "The Temple of Abomination"; yet he also says that "Damnonia and the country extending to Caer Odun, is ruled over by Uther Pendragon." Yet mythology states that Uther preceded Arthur. I have changed the text to read "80 years" in both cases, as this is a little closer to the supposed period of Arthurian events. Evidently Howard wrote "Tigers of the Sea"so long after "The Temple of Abomination" that he had forgotten what he had written in the earlier story.

A few centuries later Turlogh O'Brien, an Irish outlaw-wolf very similar to Cormac Mac Art, appears on the scene. He roams alone, an outcast, fighting with Viking and Gael alike, the hands of all men against

him. "The Dark Man," in which a supernaturally-endowed image of the now-legendary Bran Mak Morn aids Turlogh in destroying the Vikings who kidnapped and slew an Irish princess, is one of Howard's finest tales. Turlogh possesses the same streak of moody pessimism about the universe as Kull and Cormac; in "The Gods of Bal-Sagoth" Howard writes of him: "... but to the black haired fighting-man of the West, it seemed that even in the loudest clamor of triumph, the trumpet, the drum and the shouting faded away into the forgotten dust and silence of eternity. Kingdoms and empires pass away like mist from the sea, thought Turlogh ... and it seemed to him that he and Athelstane walked in a dead city, through throngs of dim ghosts ... " This is Howard's own basic attitude showing through—the attitude of the outsider who feels life to be somehow unsatisfying and unreal.

Another Irish hero takes the stage in "The Cairn on the Headland"—Red Cumal, who fought under King Brian Boru against the Vikings at the battle of Clontarf. But Red Cumal does not quite fit into the pattern, for he is described as massive, bearlike and red-bearded; he is doubtless descended from one of those tribes with a strong dash of Celtic who arrived in Ireland later than the pure-strain Gaels.

Finally we have Cormac Fitzgeoffrey, another outlaw-warrior, who followed Richard the Lion-hearted to the Holy Land for plunder and adventure.

Cormac, of Norman-Gaelic ancestry, looks and acts more like Conan than any of Howard's heroes since the Hyborian age. Dark, scarred, sinister, his great muscular frame suited in chain mail, he wades through his enemies like a steel juggernaut, the silver skull embossed on his shield striking terror into the hearts of Turk and Bedouin while his great Frankish broadsword hews them asunder. Only three tales of this Conanomorphic adventurer exist, none of which has appeared between hard covers. An unpublished fragment (which I have completed and titled "The Slave-Princess") describes how Cormac Fitzgeoffrey fought in his first battle at the age of eight! Like Conan, he shows little tendency toward moody philosophizing on the ephemeral nature of life; he is out for what plunder he can get from Moslem or Christian, but possesses a rude, basic chivalry withal.

Such were the heroes one might call Robert E. Howard's "former incarnations." Certainly they symbolize his idealized self-conception, and no doubt it must have amused him to fantasize that such men had been part of his own ancestry back through the mists of time, even into prehistory and the heroic ages of myth.

Two of the tales in this book were incomplete when they were discovered among Howard's effects; judging from appearances, he probably finished

them rather than abandoned them midway, and the endings were later lost. I have written the last 700 or so words of "The Temple of Abomination" and the last 5,200 of "Tigers of the Sea." While I was editing this book, Glenn Lord discovered a much shorter and presumably earlier version of "The Temple of Abomination"; the final sentences of the version presented here were taken from it.

Howard's text was left as he wrote it, except for routine editing where errors and slight inconsistencies have made changes desirable.

——Richard L. Tierney

St. Paul, Minnesota
February 19, 1974

TIGERS OF THE SEA

TIGERS OF THE SEA

"Tigers of the sea! Men with the hearts of wolves and thews of fire and steel! Feeders of ravens whose only joy lies in slaying and dying! Giants to whom the death-song of the sword is sweeter than the love-song of a girl!"

The tired eyes of King Gerinth were shadowed.

"This is no new tale to me; for a score of years such men have assailed my people like hunger-maddened wolves."

"Take a page from Caesar's book," answered Conal the minstrel as he lifted a wine goblet and drank deep. "Have we not read in the Roman books how he pitted wolf against wolf? Aye—that way he conquered our ancestors, who in their day were wolves also."

"And now they are more like sheep," murmured the king, a quiet bitterness in his voice. "In the years of the peace of Rome, our people forgot the arts of war. Now Rome has fallen and we fight for our lives—and cannot even protect our women."

Conal set down the goblet and leaned across the finely carved oak table.

"Wolf against wolf!" he cried. "You have told me—as well I knew!—that no warriors could be spared from the borders to search for your sister, the princess Helen—even if you knew where she is to be found. Therefore, you must enlist the aid of other men—and these men I have just described to you are as superior in ferocity and barbarity to the savage Angles that assail us as the Angles themselves are superior to our softened peasantry."

"But would they serve under a Briton against their own blood?" demurred the king. "And would they keep faith with me?"

"They hate each other as much as we hate them both," answered the minstrel. "Moreover, you can promise them the reward—only when they return with the princess Helen."

"Tell me more of them," requested King Gerinth.

"Wulfhere the Skull-splitter, the chieftain, is a red-bearded giant like all his race. He is crafty in his way, but leads his Vikings mainly because of his fury in battle. He handles his heavy, long-shafted axe as lightly as if it were a toy, and with it he shatters the swords, shields, helmets and skulls of all who oppose him. When Wulfhere crashes through the ranks,

stained with blood, his crimson beard bristling and his terrible eyes blazing and his great axe clotted with blood and brains, few there are who dare face him.

"But it is on his righthand man that Wulfhere depends for advice and council. That one is crafty as a serpent and is known to us Britons of old—for he is no Viking at all by birth, but a Gael of Erin, by name Cormac Mac Art, called *an Cliuin,* or the Wolf. Of old he led a band of Irish reivers and harried the coasts of the British Isles and Gaul and Spain—aye, and he preyed also on the Vikings themselves. But civil war broke up his band and he joined the forces of Wulfhere—they are Danes and dwell in a land south of the people who are called Norsemen.

"Cormac Mac Art has all the guile and reckless valor of his race. He is tall and rangy, a tiger where Wulfhere is a wild bull. His weapon is the sword, and his skill is incredible. The Vikings rely little on the art of fencing; their manner of fighting is to deliver mighty blows with the full sweep of their arms. Well, the Gael can deal a full arm blow with the best of them, but he favors the point. In a world where the old-time skill of the Roman swordsman is almost forgoten, Cormac Mac Art is well-nigh invincible. He is cool and deadly as the wolf for which he is named, yet at times, in the fury of battle, a madness comes upon him that transcends the frenzy of the Berserk. At such

times he is more terrible than Wulfhere, and men who would face the Dane flee before the blood-lust of the Gael."

King Gerinth nodded. "And could you find these men for me?"

"Lord King, even now they are within reach. In a lonely bay on the western coast, in a little-frequented region, they have beached their dragon-ship and are making sure that it is fully sea-worthy before moving against the Angles. Wulfhere is no sea-king; he has but one ship—but so swiftly he moves and so fierce is his crew that the Angles, Jutes and Saxons fear him more than any of their other foes. He revels in battle. He will do as you wish him, if the reward is great enough."

"Promise him anything you will," answered Gerinth. "It is more than a princess of the realm that has been stolen—it is my little sister."

His fine, deeply-lined face was strangely tender as he spoke.

"Let me attend to it," said Donal, refilling his goblet. "I know where these Vikings are to be found. I can pass among them—but I tell you before I start that it will take your Majesty's word, from your own lips, to convince Cormac Mac Art of—anything! Those Western Celts are more wary than the Vikings themselves."

Again King Gerinth nodded. He knew that the minstrel had walked strange paths and that though he was loquacious on most subjects, he was tight-lipped

on others. Donal was blest or cursed with a strange and roving mind and his skill with the harp opened many doors to him that axes could not open. Where a warrior had died, Donal of the Harp walked unscathed. He knew well many fierce sea-kings who were but grim legends and myths to most of the people of Britain, but Gerinth had never had cause to doubt the minstrel's loyalty.

II.

Wulfhere of the Danes fingered his crimson beard and scowled abstractedly. He was a giant; his breast muscles bulged like twin shields under his scale mail corselet. The horned helmet on his head added to his great height, and with his huge hand knotted about the long shaft of a great axe he made a picture of rampant barbarism not easily forgotten. But for all his evident savagery, the chief of the Danes seemed slightly bewildered and undecided. He turned and growled a question to a man who sat near.

This man was tall and rangy. He was big and powerful, and though he lacked the massive bulk of the Dane, he more than made up for it by the tigerish litheness that was apparent in his every move. He was dark, with a smooth-shaven face and square-cut black hair. He wore none of the golden armlets or ornaments of which the Vikings were so fond. His mail was of

chain mesh and his helmet, which lay beside him, was crested with flowing horse-hair.

"Well, Cormac," growled the pirate chief, "what think you?"

Cormac Mac Art did not reply directly to his friend. His cold, narrow, grey eyes gazed full into the blue eyes of Donal the minstrel. Donal was a thin man of more than medium height. His wayward unruly hair was yellow. Now he bore neither harp now sword and his dress was whimsically remniscent of a court jester. His thin, patrician face was as inscrutable at the moment as the sinister, scarred features of the Gael.

"I trust you as much as I trust any man," said Cormac, "but I must have more than your mere word on the matter. How do I know that this is not some trick to send us on a wild goose chase, or mayhap into a nest of our enemies? We have business on the east coast of Britain—"

"The matter of which I speak will pay you better than the looting of some pirate's den," answered the minstrel. "If you will come with me, I will bring you to the man who may be able to convince you. But you must come alone, you and Wulfhere."

"A trap," grumbled the Dane. "Donal, I am disappointed in you—"

Cormac, looking deep into the minstrel's strange eyes, shook his head slowly.

"No, Wulfhere; if it be a trap, Donal too is duped

and that I cannot believe."

"If you believe that," said Donal, "why can you not believe my mere word in regard to the other matter?"

"That is different," answered the reiver. "Here only my life and Wulfhere's is involved. The other concerns every member of our crew. It is my duty to them to require every proof. I do not think you lie; but you may have been lied to."

"Come, then, and I will bring you to one whom you will believe in spite of yourself."

Cormac rose from the great rock whereon he had been sitting and donned his helmet. Wulfhere, still grumbling and shaking his head, shouted an order to the Vikings who sat grouped about a small fire a short distance away, cooking a haunch of venison. Others were tossing dice in the sand, and others still working on the dragon-ship which was drawn up on the beach. Thick forest grew close about this cove, and that fact, coupled with the wild nature of the region, made it an ideal place for a pirate's rendevous.

"All sea-worthy and ship-shape," grumbled Wulfhere, referring to the galley. "On the morrow we could have sailed forth on the Viking path again—"

"Be at ease, Wulfhere," advised the Gael. "If Donal's man does not make matters sufficiently clear for our satisfaction, we have but to return and take the path."

"Aye—if we return."

"Why, Donal knew of our presence. Had he wished to betray us, he could have led a troop of Gerinth's horsemen upon us, or surrounded us with British bowmen. Donal, at least, I think, means to deal squarely with us as he has done in the past. It is the man behind Donal I mistrust."

The three had left the small bay behind them and now walked along in the shadow of the forest. The land tilted upward rapidly and soon the forest thinned out to straggling clumps and single gnarled oaks that grew between and among huge boulders—boulders broken as if in a Titan's play. The landscape was rugged and wild in the extreme. Then at last they rounded a cliff and saw a tall man, wrapped in a purple cloak, standing beneath a mountain oak. He was alone and Donal walked quickly toward him, beckoning his companions to follow. Cormac showed no sign of what he thought, but Wulfhere growled in his beard as he gripped the shaft of his axe and glanced suspiciously on all sides, as if expecting a horde of swordsmen to burst out of ambush. The three stopped before the silent man and Donal doffed his feathered cap. The man dropped his cloak and Cormac gave a low exclamation.

"By the blood of the gods! King Gerinth himself!"

He made no movement to kneel or to uncover his

head, not did Wulfhere. These wild rovers of the sea acknowledged the rule of no king. Their attitude was the respect accorded a fellow warrior; that was all. There was neither insolence not deference in their manner, though Wulfhere's eyes did widen slightly as he gazed at the man whose keen brain and matchless valor had for years, and against terrific odds, stemmed the triumphant march of the Saxons to the Western sea.

The Dane saw a tall, slender man with a weary aristocratic face and kindly grey eyes. Only in his black hair was the Latin strain in his veins evident. Behind him lay the ages of a civilization now crumbled to the dust before the onstriding barbarians. He represented the last far-flung remnant of Rome's once mighty empire, struggling on the waves of barbarism which had engulfed the rest of that empire in one red inundation. Cormac, while possessing the true Gaelic antipathy for his Cymric kin in general, sensed the pathos and valor of this brave, vain struggle, and even Wulfhere, looking into the far-seeing eyes of the British king, felt a trifle awed. Here was a people, with their back to the wall, fighting grimly for their lives and at the same time vainly endeavoring to uphold the culture and ideals of an age already gone forever. The gods of Rome had faded under the ruthless heel of Goth and Vandal. Flaxen-haired savages reigned in the purple halls of the vanished Caesars. Only in this

far-flung isle a little band of Romanized Celts clung to the traditions of yesterday.

"These are the warriors, your Majesty," said Donal, and Gerinth nodded and thanked him with the quiet courtesy of a born nobleman.

"They wish to hear again from your lips what I have told them," said the bard.

"My friends," said the king quietly, "I come to ask your aid. My sister, the princess Helen, a girl of twenty years of age, has been stolen—how, or by whom, I do not know. She rode into the forest one morning attended only by her maid and a page, and she did not return. It was on one of those rare occasions when our coasts were peaceful; but when search parties were sent out, they found the page dead and horribly mangled in a small glade deep in the forest. The horses were found later, wandering loose, but of the princess Helen and her maid there was no trace. Nor was there ever a trace found of her, though we combed the kingdom from border to sea. Spies sent among the Angles and Saxons found no sign of her, and we at last decided that she had been taken captive and borne away by some wandering band of sea-farers who, roaming inland, had seized her and then taken to sea again.

"We are helpless to carry on such a search as must be necessary if she is to be found. We have no ships—the last remnant of the British fleet was destroyed in

the sea-fight off Cornwall by the Saxons. And if we had ships, we could not spare the men to man them, not even for the princess Helen. The Angles press hard on our eastern borders and Cerdic's brood raven upon us from the south. In my extremity I appeal to you. I cannot tell you where to look for my sister. I cannot tell you how to recover her if found. I can only say: in the name of God, search the ends of the world for her, and if you find her, return with her and name your price."

Wulfhere glanced at Cormac as he always did in matters that required thought.

"Better that we set a price before we go," grunted the Gael.

"Then you agree?" cried the king, his fine face lighting.

"Not so fast," returned the wary Gael. "Let us first bargain. It is no easy task you set us: to comb the seas for a girl of whom nothing is known save that she was stolen. How if we search the oceans and return empty-handed?"

"Still I will reward you," answered the king. "I have gold in plenty. Would I could trade it for warriors—but I have Vortigern's example before me."

"If we go and bring back the princess, alive or dead," said Cormac, "you shall give us a hundred pounds of virgin gold, and ten pounds of gold for each man we lose on the voyage. If we do our best and cannot find the princess, you whall still give us ten

pounds for every man slain in the search, but we will waive further reward. We are not Saxons, to haggle over money. Moreover, in either event you will allow us to overhaul our long ship in one of your bays, and furnish us with material enough to replace such equipment as may be damaged during the voyage. Is it agreed?"

"You have my word and my hand on it," answered the king, stretching out his arm, and as their hands met Cormac felt the nervous strength in the Briton's fingers.

"You sail at once?"

"As soon as we can return to the cove."

"I will accompany you," said Donal suddenly, "and there is another who would come also."

He whistled abruptly—and came nearer to sudden decapitation than he guessed; the sound was too much like a signal of attack to leave the wolf-like nerves of the sea-farers untouched. Cormac and Wulfhere, however, relaxed as a single man strode from the forest.

"This is Marcus, of a noble British house," said Donal, "the betrothed of the princess Helen. He too will accompany us if he may."

The young man was above medium height and well built. He was in full chain mail armor and wore the crested helmet of a legionary; a straight thrusting-sword was girt upon him. His eyes were grey, but his

black hair and the faint olive-brown tint of his complexion showed that the warm blood of the South ran far more strongly in his veins than in those of his king. He was undeniably handsome, though now his face was shadowed with worry.

"I pray you will allow me to accompany you." He addressed himself to Wulfhere. "The game of war is not unknown to me—and waiting here in ignorance of the fate of my promised bride would be worse to me than death."

"Come if you will," growled Wulfhere. "It's like we'll need all the swords we can muster before the cruise is over. King Gerinth, have you no hint whatever of who took the princess?"

"None. We found only a single trace of anything out of the ordinary in the forests. Here it is."

The king drew from his garments a tiny object and passed it to the chieftain. Wulfhere stared, unenlightened, at the small, polished flint arrowhead which lay in his huge palm. Cormac took it and looked closely at it. His face was inscrutable but his cold eyes flickered momentarily. Then the Gael said a strange thing:

"I will not shave today, after all."

III.

The fresh wind filled the sails of the dragon-ship and the rhythmic clack of many oars answered the deep-chested chant of the rowers. Cormac Mac Art, in full armor, the horse-hair of his helmet floating in the breeze, leaned on the rail of the poop-deck. Wulfhere banged his axe on the deal planking and roared an unnecessary order at the steersman.

"Cormac," said the huge Viking, "who is king of Britain?"

"Who is king of Hades when Pluto is away?" asked the Gael.

"Read me no runes from your knowledge of Roman myths," growled Wulfhere.

"Rome ruled Britain as Pluto rules Hades," answered Cormac. "Now Rome has fallen and the lesser demons are battling among themselves for mastery. Some eighty years ago the legions were withdrawn from Britain when Alaric and his Goths sacked the imperial city. Vortigern was king of Britain—or rather, made himself so when the Britons had to look to themselves for aid. He let the wolves in, himself, when he hired Hengist and Horsa and their Jutes to fight off the Picts, as you know. The Saxons and Angles poured in after them like a red wave and Vortigern fell. Britain is split into three Celtic king-

doms now, with the pirates holding all the eastern coast and slowly but surely forcing their way westward. The southern kingdom, Damnonia and the country extending to Caer Odun, is ruled over by Uther Pendragon. The middle kingdom, from Uther's lines to the foot of the Cumbrian Mountains, is held by Gerinth. North of his kingdom is the realm known by the Britons as Strath-Clyde—King Garth's domain. His people are the wildest of all the Britons, for many of them are tribes which were never fully conquered by Rome. Also, in the most westwardly tip of Damnonia and among the western mountains of Gerinth's land are barbaric tribes who never acknowledged Rome and do not now acknowledge any one of the three kings. The whole land is prey to robbers and bandits, and the three kings are not always at peace among themselves, owing to Uther's waywardness, which is tinged with madness, and to Garth's innate savagery. Were it not that Gerinth acts as a buffer between them, they would have been at each other's throats long ago.

"As it is they seldom act in concert for long. The Jutes, Angles and Saxons who assail them are forever at war among themselves also, as you know, but a never-ending supply streams across the Narrow Seas in their long, low galleys."

"That too I well know," growled the Dane, "having sent some score of those galleys to Mid-

gaard. Some day my own people will come and take Britain from them."

"It is a land worth fighting for," responded the Gael. "What think you of the men we have shipped aboard?"

"Donal we know of old. He can tear the heart from my breast with his harp when he is so minded, or make me a boy again. And in a pinch we know he can wield a sword. As for the Roman—" so Wulfhere termed Marcus, "he has the look of a seasoned warrior."

"His ancestors were commanders of British legions for three centuries, and before that they trod the battlefields of Gaul and Italy with Caesar. It is but the remnant of Roman strategy lingering in the British knights that has enabled them to beat back the Saxons thus far. But, Wulfhere, what think you of my beard?" The Gael rubbed the bristly stubble that covered his face.

"I never saw you so unkempt before," grunted the Dane, "save when we had fled or fought for days so you could not be hacking at your face with a razor."

"It will hide my scars in a few days," grinned Cormac. "When I told you to head for Ara in Dalriadia, did naught occur to you?"

"Why, I assumed you would ask for news of the princess among the wild Scots there."

"And why did you suppose I would expect them

to know?"

Wulfhere shrugged his shoulders. "I am done seeking to reason out your actions."

Cormac drew from his pouch the flint arrowhead. "In all the British Isles there is but one race who makes such points for their arrows. They are the Picts of Caledonia, who ruled these isles before the Celts came, in the age of stone. Even now they tip their arrows often with flint, as I learned when I fought under King Gol of Dalriadia. There was a time, soon after the legions left Britain, when the Picts ranged like wolves clear to the southern coast. But the Jutes and Angles and Saxons drove them back into the heather country, and for so long has King Garth served as a buffer between them and Gerinth that he and his people have forgotten their ways."

"Then you think Picts stole the princess? But how did they—"

"That is for me to learn; that's why we are heading for Ara. The Dalriadians and the Picts have been alternately fighting with each other and against each other for over a hundred years. Just now there is peace between them and the Scots are likely to know much of what goes on in the Dark Empire, as the Pictish kingdom is called—and dark it is, and strange. For these Picts come of an old, old race and their ways are beyond our ken."

"And we will capture a Scot and question him?"

Cormac shook his head. "I will go ashore and mingle with them; they are of my race and language."

"And when they recognize you," grunted Wulfhere, "they will hang you to the highest tree. They have no cause to love you. True, you fought under King Gol in your early youth, but since then you have raided Dalriadia's coasts more than once—not only with your Irish reivers, but with me, likewise."

"And that is why I am growing a beard, old sea-dragon," laughed the Gael.

IV

Night had fallen over the rugged western coast of Caledon. Eastward loomed against the stars the distant mountains; westward, the dark seas stretched away to uncharted gulfs and unknown shores. The *Raven* rode at anchor on the northern side of a wild and rugged promontory that ran out into the sea, hugging close those beetling cliffs. Under cover of darkness Cormac had steered her inshore, threading the treacherous reefs of that grim shore with a knowledge born of long experience. Cormac Mac Art was Erin-born, but all the isles of the Western Sea had been his stamping ground since the day he had been able to lift his first sword.

"And now," said Cormac, "I go ashore—alone."

"Let me go with you!" cried Marcus, eagerly, but the Gael shook his head.

"Your appearance and accent would betray us both. Nor can you either, Donal, for though I know the kings of the Scots have listened to your harp, you are the only one besides myself who knows this coast, and if I fail to return you must take her out."

The Gael's appearance was vastly altered. A thick, short beard masked his features, concealing his scars. He had laid aside his horse-hair crested helmet and his finely worked mail shirt, and had donned the round helmet and crude scale mail corselet of the Dalriadians. The arms of many nations were part of the *Raven's* cargo.

"Well, old sea-wolf," said he with a wicked grin, as he prepared to lower himself over the rail, "you have said nothing, but I see a gleam in your eyes; do you also wish to accompany me? Surely the Dalriadians could have nothing but welcome for so kind a friend who has burnt their villages and sunk their hide-bottomed boats."

Wulfhere cursed him heartedly. "We sea-farers are so well loved by the Scots that my red beard alone would be enough to hang me. But even so, were I not captain of this ship, and bound by duty to it, I'd chance it rather than see you go into danger alone, and you such an empty-headed fool!"

Cormac laughed deeply. "Wait for me until dawn," he instructed, "and no longer."

Then, dropping from the after rail, he struck out for the shore, swimming strongly in spite of his mail and weapons. He swam along the base of the cliffs and presently found a shelving ledge from which a steep incline led upward. It might have taxed the agility of a mountain goat to have made the ascent there, but Cormac was not inclined to make the long circuit about the promontory. He climbed straight upward and, after a considerable strain of energy and skill, he gained the top of the cliffs and made his way along them to the point where they joined a steep ridge on the mainland. Down the southern slope of this he made his way toward the distant twinkle of fires that marked the Dalriadian town of Ara.

He had not taken half a dozen steps when a sound behind him brought him about, blade at the ready. A huge figure bulked dimly in the starlight.

"Hrut! What in the name of seven devils—"

"Wulfhere sent me after you," rumbled the big carle. "He feared harm might come to you."

Cormac was a man of irascible temper. He cursed Hrut and Wulfhere impartially. Hrut listened stolidly and Cormac knew the futility of arguing with him. The big Dane was a silent, moody creature whose mind had been slightly affected by a sword-cut on the

head. But he was brave and loyal and his skill at woodcraft was second only to Cormac's.

"Come along," said Cormac, concluding his tirade, "but you cannot come into the village with me. You understand that you must hide outside the walls?"

The carle nodded, and motioning him to follow, Cormac took up his way at a steady trot. Hrut followed swiftly and silently as a ghost for all his bulk. Cormac went swiftly, for he would be crowded indeed to accomplish what he had set out to do and return to the dragon-ship by mid-day—but he went warily, for he expected momentarily to meet a party of warriors leaving or returning to the town. Yet luck was with him, and soon he crouched among the trees within arrow shot of the village.

"Hide here," he whispered to Hrut, "and on no account come any nearer the town. If you hear a brawl, wait until an hour before dawn; then, if you have heard naught from me, go back to Wulfhere. Do you understand?"

The usual nod was the answer and as Hrut faded back among the trees, Cormac went boldly toward the village.

Ara was build close to the shore of a small, landlocked bay and Cormac saw the crude hide coracles of the Dalriadians drawn up on the beach. In these they

swept south in fierce raids on the Britons and Saxons, or crossed to Ulster for supplies and reinforcements. Ara was more of an army camp than a town, the real seat of Dalriadia lying some distance inland.

The village was not a particularly imposing place. Its few hundred wattle and mud huts were surrounded by a low wall of rough stones, but Cormac knew the temper of its inhabitants. What the Caledonian Gaels lacked in wealth and armament they made up in unquenchable ferocity. A hundred years of ceaseless conflict with Pict, Roman, Briton and Saxon had left them little opportunity to cultivate the natural seeds of civilization that was an heritage of their native land. The Gaels of Caledonia had gone backward a step; they were behind their Irish cousins in culture and artisanship, but they had not lost an iota of the Gaelic fighting fury.

Their ancestors had come from Ulahd into Caledonia, driven by a stronger tribe of the southern Irish. Cormac, born in what was later known as Connacht, was a son of these conquerors, and felt himself not only distinct from these transplanted Gaels, but from their cousins in northern Erin. Still, he had spent enough time among these people to deceive them, he felt.

He strode up to the crude gate and shouted for entrance before he was perceived by the guard, who were prone to be lax in their vigilance in the face of

apparent quietude—a universal Celtic trait. A harsh voice ordered him to stand still, while a torch thrust above the gate shone its flickering light full on him. In its illumination Cormac could see, framed above the gate, fierce faces with unkempt beards and cold grey or blue eyes.

"Who are you?" one of the guards demanded.

"Partha Mac Othna, of Ulahd. I have come to take service under your chief, Eochaidh Mac Ailbe."

"Your garments are dripping wet."

"And they were not it would be a marvel," answered Cormac. "There was a boat load of us set sail from Ulahd this morning. On the way a Saxon sea-rover ran us down and all but I perished in the waves and the arrows the pirates rained upon us. I caught a piece of the broken mast and essayed to float."

"And what of the Saxon?"

"I saw the sails disappear southward. Mayhap they raid the Britons."

"How is it that the guard along the beach did not see you when you finally came ashore?"

"I made shore more than a mile to the south, and glimpsing the lights through the trees, came here. I have been here aforetime and knew it to be Ara, whither I was bound."

"Let him in," growled one of the Dalriadians. "His tale rings true."

The clumsy gate swung open and Cormac

entered the fortified camp of his hereditary foes. Fires blazed between the huts, and gathered close about the gate was the curious throng who had heard the guard challenge Cormac. Men, women and children partook of the wildness and savagery of their hard country. The women, splendidly built amazons with loose flowing hair, stared at him curiously, and dirty-faced, half-naked children peered at him from under shocks of tangled hair—and Cormac noted that each held a weapon of sorts. Brats scarcely able to toddle held a stone or a piece of wood. This symbolized the fierce life they led, when even the very babes had learned to snatch up a weapon at the first hint of alarm—aye, and to fight like wounded wildcats if need be. Cormac noted the fierceness of the people, their lean, hard savagery. No wonder Rome had never broken these people!

Some fifteen years had passed since Cormac had fought in the ranks of the ferocious warriors. He had no fear of being recognized by any of his former comrades. Nor, with his thick beard as a disguise, did he expect recognition as Wulfhere's comrade.

Cormac followed the warrior who led him toward the largest hut in the village. This, the pirate was sure, housed the chieftain and his folk. There was no elegance in Caledonia. King Gol's palace was a wattled hut. Cormac smiled to himself as he compared this village with the cities he had see in his wanderings.

Yet it was not walls and towers that made a city, he reflected, but the people within.

He was escorted into the great hut where a score of warriors were drinking from leather jacks about a crudely carved table. At the head sat the chief, known to Cormac of old, and at his elbow the inevitable minstrel—a characteristic of Celtic court life, however crude the court. Cormac involuntarily compared this skin-clad, shock-headed kern to the cultured and chivalrous Donal.

"Son of Ailbe," said Cormac's escort, "here is a weapon-man from Erin who wishes to take service under you."

"Who is your chief?" hiccupped Eochaidh, and Cormac saw that the Dalriadian was drunk.

"I am a free wanderer," answered the Wolf. "Aforetime I followed the bows of Donn Ruadh Mac Finn, *flaith na* Ulahd."

"Sit ye down and drink," ordered Eochaidh with an uncertain wave of his hairy hand. "Later I will talk with you."

No more attention was paid to Cormac, except the Scots made a place for him and a shock-headed gilly filled his cup with the fiery potheen so relished by the Gaels. The Wolf's ranging eye took in all the details of the scene, passed casually over the Dalriadian fighting-men and rested long on two men who sat almost opposite him. One of these Cormac

knew—he was a renegade Norseman, Sigrel by name, who had found sanctuary among the foes of his race. Cormac's pulse quickened as he caught the evil eyes of the man fixed narrowly on him, but the sight of the man beside the Norseman made him forget Sigrel for the moment.

This man was short and strongly made. He was dark, much darker than Cormac himself, and from a face as immobile as an idol's, two black eyes glittered reptile-like. His square-cut black hair was caught back and confined by a narrow silver band about his temples, and he wore only a loin cloth and a broad leather girdle from which hung a short, barbed sword. A Pict! Cormac's heart leaped. He had intended drawing Eochaidh into conversation at once and, by the means of a tale he had already fabricated, to draw from him any information he might have of the whereabouts of the princess Helen. But the Dalriadian chief was too drunk for that now. He roared barbaric songs, pounded the board with his sword hilt in accompaniment to the wild strains of his minstrel's harp, and between times guzzled potheen at an astounding rate. All were drunk—all save Cormac and Sigrel, who furtively eyed the Gael over the rim of his goblet.

While Cormac racked his brain for a convincing way of drawing the Pict into conversation, the minstrel concluded one of his wild chants with a burst of sound and a rhyme that named Eochaidh Mac Ailbe

"Wolf of Alba, greatest of raven-saters!"

The Pict reeled drunkenly to his feet, dashing his drinking-jack down on the board. The Picts habitually drank a smooth ale made from the heather blossoms. The fiery barley malt brewed by the Gaels maddened them. This particular Pict's brain was on fire. His face, no longer immobile, writhed demoniacally and his eyes glowed like coals of black fire.

"True, Eochaidh Mac Ailbe is a great warrior," he cried in his barbarous Gaelic, "but even he is not the greatest warrior in Caledonia. Who is greater than King Brogar, the Dark One, who rules the ancient throne of Pictdom? And next to him is Grulk! I am Grulk the Skull-cleaver! In my house in Grothga there is a mat woven of the scalps of Britons, Angles, Saxons—aye, and Scots!"

Cormac shrugged his shoulders in impatience. The drunken boastings of this savage would be likely to bring him a sword-thrust from the drink-fired Scots, that would cut off all chance of learning anything from him. But the Pict's next words electrified the Gael.

"Who of all Caledonia has taken a more beautiful women from the southern Britons than Grulk?" he shouted, reeling and glaring. "There were five of us in the hide-bottomed boat the gale blew southward. We went ashore in Gerinth's realm for fresh water, and

there we came upon three Britons deep in the forest—one lad and two beautiful maidens. The boy showed fight, but I, Grulk, leaping upon his shoulders, bore him to earth and disembowelled him with my sword. The women we took into our boat and fled with them northward, and gained the coast of Caledonia, and took the women to Grothga!"

"Words—and empty words," sneered Cormac, leaning across the table. "There are no such women in Grothga now!"—taking a long chance.

The Pict howled like a wolf and fumbled drunkenly for his sword.

"When old Gonar, the high priest, looked on the face of the most finely dressed one—she who called herself Atalanta—he cried out that she was sacred to the moon god—that the symbol was upon her breast, though none but he could see. So he sent her, with the other, Marcia, to the Isle of Altars, in the Shetlands, in a long boat the Scots lent him, with fifteen warriors. The girl Atalanta is the daughter of a British nobleman and she will be acceptable in the eyes of Golka of the moon."

"How long since they departed for the Shetlands?" asked Cormac, as the Pict showed signs of making a quarrel of it.

"Three weeks; the night of the Nuptials of the Moon is not yet. But you said I lied—"

KIRK
THE·PRINCESS·HELEN

"Drink and forget it," growled a warrior, thrusting a brimming goblet at him. The Pict seized it with both hands and thrust his face into the liquor, guzzling ravenously, while the liquid slopped down on his bare chest. Cormac rose from his bench. He had learned all he wished to know, and he believed the Scots were too drunk to notice his casual departure from the hut. Outside it might be a different matter to get past the wall. But no sooner had he risen than another was on his feet. Sigrel, the renegade Viking, came around the table toward him.

"What, Partha," he said maliciously, "is your thirst so soon satisfied?"

Suddenly he thrust out a hand and pushed back the Gael's helmet from his brows. Cormac angrily struck his hand away, and Sigrel leaped back with a yell of ferocious triumph.

"Eochaidh! Men of Caledonia! A thief and a liar is among you!"

The drunken warriors gaped stupidly.

"This is Cormac *an Cliuin*," shouted Sigrel, reaching for his sword, "Cormac Mac Art, comrade of Wulfhere the Viking!"

Cormac moved with the volcanic quickness of a wounded tiger. Steel flashed in the flickering torchlight and Sigrel's head rolled grinning beneath the feet of the astonished revelers. A single bound

carried the reiver to the door and he vanished while the Scots were struggling to their feet, roaring bewilderedly and tugging at their swords.

In an instant the whole village was in an uproar. Men had seen Cormac leap from the chief's hut with his red-stained sword in his hand and they gave chase without asking the reason for his flight. The partially sobered feasters came tumbling out of the hut yelling and cursing, and when they shouted the real identity of their erstwhile guest a thunderous roar of rage went up and the whole village joined vengefully in the chase.

Cormac, weaving in and out among the huts like a flying shadow, came on an unguarded point of the wall and, without slackening his headlong gait, cleared the low barrier with a bound and raced toward the forest. A quick glance over his shoulder showed him that his escape had been seen. Warriors were swarming over the wall, weapons in their hands.

It was some distance to the first thick tangle of trees. Cormac took it full speed, running low and momentarily expecting an arrow between his shoulders. But the Dalriadians had no skill at archery and he reached the fringe of forest unscathed.

He had outfooted the fleet Caledonians, all save one who had outdistanced his fellows by a hundred yards and was now close upon the reiver's heels. Cormac wheeled to dispose of this single foe, and even

as he turned a stone rolled under his foot and flung him to his knee. He flung up his blade to block the sword that hovered over him like the shadow of Doom—but before it could fall, a giant shape catapulted from the trees, a heavy sword crashed down, and the Scot fell limply across Cormac, his skull shattered.

The Gael flung off the corpse and leaped to his feet. The yelling pursuers were close now, and Hrut, snarling like a wild beast, faced them—but Cormac seized his wrist and dragged him back among the trees. The next instant they were fleeing in the direction from which they had first come to Ara, ducking and dodging among the trees.

Behind them, and presently on either side, they heard the crashing of men through the underbrush, and savage yells. Hundreds of warriors had joined in the hunt of their arch-enemy. Cormac and Hrut slackened their speed and went warily, keeping in the deep shadows, flitting from tree to tree, now lying prone in the bushes to let a band of searchers go by. They had progressed some little distance when Cormac was galvanized by the deep baying of hounds far behind them.

"We are ahead of our pursuers now, I think," muttered the Gael. "We might make a dash of it and gain the ridge and from thence the promontory and the ship. But they have loosed the wolfhounds on our

trail and if we take that way, we will lead them and the warriors straight to Wulfhere's ship. There are enough of them to swim out and board her and take her by storm. We must swim for it."

Cormac turned westward, almost at right-angles to the course they had been following, and they quickened their pace recklessly—and emerging into a small glade ran full into three Dalriadians who assailed them with yells. Evidently they had not been ahead of their hunters as far as Cormac had thought, and the Gael, hurling himself fiercely into the fray, knew that the fight must be short or else the sound would bring scores of warriors hastening to the spot.

One of the Scots engaged Cormac while the other two fell upon the giant Hrut. A buckler turned Cormac's first vicious thrust and the Dalriadian's sword beat down on his helmet, biting through the metal and into the scalp beneath. But before the warrior could strike again, Cormac's sword cut his left leg from under him, through the knee, and as he crumpled another stroke shore through his neck cords.

In the meantime Hrut had killed one of his opponents with a bear-like stroke that rended the upflung shield as though it had been paper and crushed the skull it sought to guard, and as Cormac turned to aid him, the remaining foe leaped in with the desperate recklessness of a dying wolf, and it seemed to the Gael that his stabbing sword sank half way to the hilt in the

Dane's mighty bosom. But Hrut gripped the Scot's throat in his huge left hand, thrust him away and struck a blow that shore through corselet and ribs and left the broken blade wedged in the dead man's spinal column.

"Are you hurt badly, Hrut?" Cormac was at his side, striving to undo the Dane's rent corselet so that he might staunch the flow of blood. But the carle pushed him away.

"A scratch," he said thickly. "I've broken my sword—let us haste."

Cormac cast a doubtful look at his companion, then turned and hurried on in the direction they had been following. Seeing that Hrut followed with apparent ease, and hearing the baying of the hounds grow nearer, Cormac increased his gait until the two were running fleetly through the midnight forest. At length they heard the lapping of the sea, and even as Hrut's breathing grew heavy and labored they emerged upon a steep rocky shore, where the trees overhung the water. To the north, jutting out into the sea could be seen the vague bulk of the promontory behind which lay the *Raven*. Three miles of rugged coast lay between the promontory and the bay of Ara. Cormac and Hrut were at a point a little over half way between, and slightly nearer the promontory than the bay.

"We swim from here," growled Cormac, "and it's

a long swim to Wulfhere's ship, around the end of the promontory—for the cliffs are too steep to climb on this side—but we can make it and the hounds can't follow our tracks in the water—what in the name of the gods—!"

Hrut had reeled and pitched headlong down the steep bank, his hands trailing in the water. Cormac reached him instantly and turned him on his back; but the Dane's fierce face was already set in death. Cormac tore open his corselet and felt beneath it for an instant, then withdrew his hand and swore in amazement at the vitality that had enabled the carle to run for nearly half a mile with that terrible wound beneath his heart. The Gael hesitated; then to his ears came the deep baying of the hounds. With a bitter curse he tore off his helmet and corselet and threw them aside, kicking off his sandals. Drawing his sword belt up another notch, he waded out into the water and then struck out strongly.

In the darkness before dawn Wulfhere, pacing the deck of his dragon-ship, heard a faint sound that was not the lapping of the waves against the hull or the cliffs. With a quick word to his comrades, the Dane stepped to the rail and peered over. Marcus and Donal pressed close behind him, and presently saw a ghostly figure clamber out of the water and up the side. Cormac Mac Art, blood-stained and half naked, clambered over the rail and snarled:

"Out oars, wolves, and pull for the open sea, before we have half a thousand Dalriadians on our backs! And head her prow for the Shetlands—the Picts have taken Gerinth's sister there."

"Where's Hrut?" rumbled Wulfhere, as Cormac started toward the sweep-head.

"Drive a brass nail into the main-mast," snarled the Gael. "Gerinth owes us ten pounds already."

The bitterness in his eyes belied the harsh callousness of his words.

V.

Marcus paced the deck of the dragon-ship. The wind filled the sails and the long ash oars of the rowers sent the long, lean craft hurtling through the water, but to the impatient Briton it seemed that they moved at a snail's pace.

"But why did the Pict call her Atalanta?" he cried, turning to Cormac. "True, her maid was named Marcia—but we have no real proof that the woman with her is the princess Helen."

"We have all the proof in the world," answered the Gael. "Do you think the princess would admit her true identity to her abductors? If they knew they held Gerinth's sister, they would have half his kingdom as ransom."

"But what did the Pict mean by the Nuptials of the Moon?"

Wulfhere looked at Cormac and Cormac started to speak, shot a quick glance at Marcus and hesitated.

"Tell him," nodded Donal. "He must know eventually."

"The Picts worship strange and abhorrent gods," said the Gael, "as is well known to we who roam the sea, eh Wulfhere?"

"Right," growled the giant. "Many a Viking has died on their altar stones."

"One of their gods is Golka of the Moon. Every so often they present a captured virgin of high rank to him. On a strange, lonely isle in the Shetlands stands a grim black altar, surrounded by columns of stone, such as you have seen at Stonehenge. On that altar, when the moon is full, the girl is sacrificed to Golka."

Marcus shuddered; his nails bit into his palms.

"Gods of Rome, can such things be?"

"Rome has fallen," grunted the Skull-splitter. "Her gods are dead. They will not aid us. But fear not—" he lifted his gleaming, keen-edged axe, "here is that which will aid us. Let me lead my wolves into the stone circle and we will give Golka such a blood-sacrifice as he has never dreamed of!"

"Sail on the port bow!" came the sudden shout of the look-out in the cross-trees. Wulfhere wheeled suddenly, beard bristling. A few moments later all on

board could make out the long, low lines of the strange craft.

"A dragon-ship," swore Cormac, "and making full speed with oar and sail—she means to cut across our bows, Wulfhere."

The chieftain swore, his cold blue eyes beginning to blaze. His whole body quivered with eagerness and a new roaring note came into the voice that bellowed commands to his crew.

"By the bones of Thor, he must be a fool! But we'll give him his fill!"

Marcus caught the Dane's mighty arm and swung him about.

"Our mission is not to fight every sea-thief we meet," the young Briton cried angrily. "You were engaged to search for the princess Helen; we must not jeopardize this expedition. Now we have at last a clue; will you throw away our chances merely to glut your foolish lust for battle?"

Wulfhere's eyes flamed.

"This to me on my own deck?" he roared. "I'll not show my stern to any rover for Gerinth and all his gold! If it's fight he wants, it's fight he'll get."

"The lad's right, Wulfhere," said Cormac quietly, "but by the blood of the gods we'll have to run for it, for yon ship is aimed straight for us and I see a running about on the deck that can mean naught but preparation for a sea-fight."

"And run we cannot," said Wulfhere in deep satisfaction, "for I know her—that ship is Rudd Thorwald's *Fire-Woman,* and he is my life-long enemy. She is as fleet as the *Raven* and if we flee we will have her hanging on our stern all the way to the Shetlands. We must fight."

"Then let us make it short and desperate," snapped Cormac, scowling. "There's scant use in trying to ram her; run alongside and we'll take her by storm."

"I was born in a sea-fight, and I sank dragon-ships before I ever saw you," roared Wulfhere. "Take the sweep-head." He turned to Marcus. "Hast ever been in a sea-brawl, youngster?"

"No, but if I fail to go further than you can lead, hang me to your dragon-beak!" snapped the angered Briton.

Wulfhere's cold eyes glinted in amused appreciation as he turned away.

There was little maneuvering of ships in that primitive age. The Vikings attained the sea-craft they had in a later day. The long, low serpents of the sea drove straight for each other, while warriors lined the sides of each, yelling and clashing sword on shield.

Marcus, leaning on the rail, glanced at the wolfish warriors beside and below him, and glanced across the intervening waves at the fierce, light-eyed, yellow-bearded Vikings who lined the sides of the opposing

galley—Jutes they were, and hereditary enemies of the red-maned Danes. The young Briton shuddered involuntarily, not from fear but because of the innate, ruthless savagery of the scene, as a man might shudder at a pack of ravening wolves, without fearing them.

And now there came a giant twanging of bowstrings and a rain of death leaped through the air. Here the Danes had the advantage; they were the bowmen of the North Sea. The Jutes, like their Saxon cousins, knew little of archery. Arrows came whistling back, but their flight lacked the deadly accuracy of the Danish shafts. Marcus saw men go down in windrows aboard the Juttish craft, while the rest crouched behind the shields that lined the sides. The three men at the sweep-head fell and the long sweep swung in a wide, erratic arc; the galley lost way and Marcus saw a blond giant he instinctively knew to be Rudd Thorwald himself leap to the sweep-head. Arrows rattled off his mail like hailstones, and then the two craft ran alongside with a rending and crashing of oars and a grinding of timbers.

The wolf-yell of the Vikings split the skies and in an instant all was a red chaos. The grappling hooks bit in, gripping keel to keel. Shields locked, the double line writhed and rocked as each crew sought to beat the other back from its bulwarks and gain the opposing deck. Marcus, thrusting and parrying with a wild-eyed giant across the rails, saw in a quick glance

over his foe's shoulder Rudd Thorwald rushing from the sweep-head to the rail. Then his straight sword was through the Jute's throat and he flung one leg over the rail. But before he could leap into the other ship, another howling devil was hacking and hewing at him, and only a shield suddenly flung above his head saved his life. It was Donal the minstrel who had come to his aid.

Toward the waist of the ship, Wulfhere surged on through the fray and one mighty sweep of his axe cleared a space for him for an instant. In that instant he was over the rail on the deck of the *Fire-Woman* and Cormac, Thorfinn, Edric and Snorri were close behind him. Snorri died the moment his feet touched the *Fire-Woman's* deck and a second later a Juttish axe split Edric's skull, but already the Danes were pouring through the breach made in the lines of the defenders and in a moment the Jutes were fighting with their backs to the wall.

On the blood-slippery deck the two Viking chieftains met. Wulfhere's axe hewed the shaft of Rudd Thorwald's spear in twain, but before the Dane could strike again, the Jute snatched a sword from a dying hand and the edge bit through Wulfhere's corselet over his ribs. In an instant the Skull-splitter's mail was dyed red, but with a mad roar he swung his axe in a two-handed stroke that rent Rudd Thorwald's armor like paper and cleft through

shoulder bone and spine. The Juttish chief fell dead in a red welter of blood and the Juttish warriors, disheartened, fell back, fighting desperately.

The Danes yelled with fierce delight. But the battle was not over. The Jutes, knowing there was no mercy for the losers of a sea-fight, battled stubbornly. Marcus was in the thick of it, with Donal close at his side. A strange madness had gripped the young Briton. To his mind, distorted momentarily by the fury of the fray, it seemed that these Jutes were holding him back from Helen. They stood in his way and while he and his comrades wasted time with them, Helen might be in desperate need of rescue. A red haze burned before Marcus' eyes and his sword wove a web of death in front of him. A huge Jute dented his shield with a sweeping axe-head and Marcus flung his shield away, ripping the warrior open with the other hand.

"By the blood of the gods," Cormac rasped, "I never heard before that Romans went berserk, but—"

Marcus had forced his way over the corpse-littered benches to the poop. A sword battered down on his helm as he leaped upward, but he paid no heed; even as he thrust mechanically, his eyes fell on a strangely incongruous ornament suspended by a slender, golden chain from the Jute's bull neck. On the end of that chain, glittering against his broad, mailed chest, hung a tiny jewel—a single ruby carved in the symbol of the acanthus. Marcus cried out like a man

with a death wound under his heart and like a madman plunged in blindly, scarcely knowing what he did. He felt his blade sink deep and the force of his charge hurled him to the poop deck on top of his victim.

Struggling to his knees, oblivious to the hell of battle about him, Marcus tore the jewel from the pirate's neck and pressed it to his lips. Then he gripped the Jute's shoulders fiercely.

"Quick!" he cried in the tongue of the Angles, which the Jutes understood. "Tell me, before I rend the heart from your breast, whence you got this gem!"

The Jute's eyes were already glazing. He was past acting on his own initiative. He heard an insistent voice questioning him, and answered dully, scarcely knowing that he did so: "From one of the girls we took. . . from the . . . Pictish boat."

Marcus shook him, frantic with a sudden agony. "What of them? Where are they?"

Cormac, seeing something was forward, had broken from the fight and now bent, with Donal, over the dying pirate.

"We . . . sold . . . them," muttered the Jute in a fading whisper, "to . . . Thorleif Hordi's son . . . at . . . "

His head fell back; the voice ceased.

Marcus looked up at Donal with pain-haunted eyes.

"Look, Donal," he cried, holding up the chain with the ruby pendant. "See? It is Helen's! I myself gave it to her—she and Marcia were on this very ship—but now—who is this Thorleif Hordi's son?"

"Easy to say," broke in Cormac. "He is a Norse reiver who has established himself in the Hebrides. Be of good cheer, young sir; Helen is better off in the hands of the Vikings than in those of the Pictish savages of the Hjaltlands."

"But surely we must waste no time now!" cried Marcus. "The gods have cast this knowledge into our hands; if we tarry we may again be put upon a false scent!"

Wulfhere and his Danes had cleared the poop and waist, but on the after deck the survivors still stubbornly contended with their conquerors. There was scant mercy shown in a sea-fight of that age. Had the Jutes been victorious they would have spared none; nor did they expect or ask for mercy.

Cormac made his way through the waist of the ship where dead and dying lay heaped, and struggled his way through the yelling Danes to where Wulfhere stood plying his dripping axe. By main force he tore the Skull-splitter from his prey and jerked him about.

"Have done, old wolf," he growled. "The fight is won; Rudd Thorwald is dead. Would you waste steel on these miserable carles?"

"I leave this ship when no Jute remains alive!" thundered the battle-maddened Dane. Cormac laughed grimly.

"Have done! Bigger game is afoot! These Jutes will drink blood before you slaughter tham all and we will need every man before the faring is over. From the lips of a dying Jute we have heard it—the princess is in the steading of Thorleif Hordi's son, in the Hebrides."

Wulfhere's beard bristled with ferocious joy. So many were his foes that it was hard to name a Viking farer with whom he had no feud.

"Is it so? Then, ho, wolves—leave the rest of these sea-rats to drown or swim as they will! We go to burn Thorleif Hordi's son's skalli over his head!"

Slowly, by words and blows, he beat his raging Danes off and, marshalling them together, drove them over the gunwales into their own ship. The bleeding, battle-weary Jutes watched them go, leaning on their reddened weapons in sullen silence. The toll taken had been terrific, but by far the greater loss aboard the *Fire-Woman.* From stem to stern dead men wallowed among the broken benches in a welter of crimson.

"Ho, rats!" Wulfhere shouted, as his Vikings cast off and the oars of the *Raven* began to ply, "I leave you your blood-gutted craft and the carrion that was Rudd Thorwald. Make the best you can of them and thank the gods that I spared your lives!"

The losers harkened in sullen silence, answering

only with black scowls, all save one—a lean, wolfish figure of a warrior, who brandished a notched and bloody axe and shouted: "Mayhap you will curse the gods some day, Skull-splitter, because you spared Halfgar Wolf's-tooth!"

It was a name, in sooth, that Wulfhere had cause to remember well in later days. But now the chief merely roared in laughter, though Cormac frowned.

"It is a foolish thing to taunt beaten men, Wulfhere," said he. "But you have a nasty cut across your ribs. Let me see to it."

Marcus turned away with the gem that Helen had worn. The flood of savagery during the last few hours left him dazed and weary. But he had discovered strange, dark deeps in his own soul. A few minutes of fierce sword-play on the gunwales of a sea-rover had sufficed to bridge the gap of three centuries. Coolness in action, a characteristic drilled into his forebears by countless Roman officers, and inherited by him, had been swept away in an instant before the wild, old Celtic fury before which Caesar had staggered on the Ceanntish beaches. For a few mad moments he had been one with the wild men about him. The shadows of Rome were fading; was he, too, like all the world, reverting to the nature of his British ancestors, blood-brothers in savagery to Wulfhere Skull-splitter?

VI.

"It is not far from here to Kaldjorn where Thorleif Hordi's son has built his steading," said Cormac, glancing abstractedly at the mast where now sixteen brass nails gleamed dully.

The Norse were already establishing themselves in the Hebrides, the Orkneys and the Shetlands. Later these movements would become permanent colonizations; at this time, however, their steadings were merely pirate camps.

"The Sudeyar lie to the east, just out of sight over the sea-rim," Cormac continued. "We must resort to craft again. Thorleif Hordi's son has four long ships and three hundred carles. We have one ship and less than eighty men. We cannot do as Wulfhere wishes: go ashore and burn Thorleif's skalli—and he will not be likely to give up such a prize as the princess Helen without a battle.

"This is what I suggest: Thorleif's steading is on the east side of the isle of Kaldjorn, which luckily is a small one. We will draw in under cover of night, on the west side. There are high cliffs there and the ship should be safe from detection for a time, since none of Thorleif's folk have any reason to wander about on the western part of the island. Then I will go ashore and seek to steal the princess."

Wulfhere laughed. "You will find it a more difficult matter to hoax the Norse than you did the Scots. Your locks will brand you as a Gael and they will cut the blood-eagle in your back."

"I will creep among them like a serpent and they will know naught of my coming," answered the Gael. "Your Norseman is a very dullard when it comes to stealth, and easy to deceive."

"I will go with you," broke in Marcus. "This time I will not be denied."

"While I must gnaw my thumb on the west side of the isle," grumbled Wulfhere enviously.

"Wait," said Donal. "I have a better plan, Cormac."

"Say on," the Gael prompted him.

"We shall buy the princess from Thorleif Hordi's son. Wulfhere—how much loot have you aboard this ship?"

"Enough gold to ransom a noble lady, mayhap," grunted the Dane, "but not enough to buy back Gerinth's sister—that would cost half a kingdom. Moreover, Thorleif is my blood-enemy, and would rather see my head on a spear at his skalli-door than all Gerinth's gold in his coffers."

"Thorleif need not know this is your ship," said Donal. "Nor can he know that the lady he holds captive is the princess Helen; to him she will be the lady Atalanta, no more. Now, here is my plan: you,

Wulfhere, shall disguise yourself and take your place with your warriors, while Thorfinn, your second-in-command, acts as chief. Marcus here shall play the part of Atalanta's brother, while I shall be her childhood mentor; we shall say we have come to ransom her, cost what it may—hiring this Viking-crew to aid us, since the Britons have no more ships and no men to spare from their borders."

"It will cost a-plenty," grumbled Wulfhere. "Thorleif is as shrewd as he is rapacious; he will drive a hard bargain."

"Let him. Gerinth will pay you back, though it cost you all the loot in your hold. The king has sent me with you to be his judge in these matters—and let my head be forfeit for any promise I should make in his name, for he shall keep it!"

"I trust your sincerity and Gerinth's" said Wulfhere, "yet this plan is not to my liking. Rather would I fall on Thorleif's skalli like a thunderbolt, with arrow-storm and sharp-edged steel."

"As would I," said Cormac; "yet Donal's plan is best if rescue of the princess Helen is our goal. Thorleif's carles outnumber us at least three to one, and even were we to best them in a surprise attack the princess might well be slain in the fray. Donal's plan is good; Thorleif would contest us with steel were he to know whom he holds as captive, but if he thinks he holds hostage only a noble lady of the Britons,

Atalanta, then doubtless he'll accept a hold full of loot for her rather than risk his ships and men in a fight. And if Donal's plan fails, then we'll still have mine to try."

"Well," said Wulfhere, "there's wisdom in Donal's way, I'll not gainsay it. But I'll stay on the strand with the crew while Thorfinn and Marcus and Donal bargain for Gerinth's daughter, lest I should betray our venture; for I have sworn that when next I see Thorleif Hordi's son's treacherous face I shall cleave it to the chin!"

"I'll be in on the bargaining," said Cormac. "Thorlief shall not recognize me through this beard."

"Likely not," grunted the Dane, "for he saw you but briefly, and that during a sea-fight. Yet I'll be ready to lead the crew in a charge should aught go wrong at the dickering. Steersman!" he bellowed, "make for the Scottish mainland—we'll need a day's rest to lick our wounds and gather provisions before we sail for the Hebrides."

As the ship headed for the wild coastland, not one man of its sharp-eyed crew noticed the ship of the defeated Jutes, with barely enough men left to man the oars, bearing off across the horizon of the gray sea toward the northeast, its square sail belled to the wind, its rowers working frantically—

Nor, far in its wake, too far to be seen save by the most keen-eyed of lookouts, the small, dark longboat

full of small, dark men—men with bows, flint-tipped arrows and dark eyes full of intent watchfulness and grim purpose.

A cold, thin drizzle chilled the air and made the rocks on the beach before Thorleif Hordi's son's steading glimmer as if with dark slime. Beyond drifting wraiths of mist the forest of spruce and pine rose like minarets in a sea of murk. Four long ships lay drawn up on the shore. Farther down the beach lay a fifth with the forepart of its keel upon the sand; near it stood a large band of red-bearded men in scale mail corselets and horned helmets, bearing spears, bows and shields. A high wall of pointed logs paralleled the upper edge of the beach, and from behind this wall rose smoke from the skalli of Thorleif and the lesser dwellings of his carles; while before it and about its broad gate stood ranked over a hundred blond Vikings, armored and armed much like those clustered about the lone long ship. Between the two large bands of warriors, some distance from either, stood a small knot of men divided into two parts and facing one another.

"Bring forth your loot," rumbled Thorleif Hordi's son. "You'll not purchase the Lady Atalanta without a lot of it. By Odin, she's a comely wench, and I'd minded to have her for one of my own brides."

Cormac eyed the huge Viking chieftain closely.

Thorleif was a giant of a man, greater even than Wulfhere, with a face pitted with scars and creased with lines of hard cruelty. There was a gap in the jawline where pale flesh showed through the thick blond beard, and Cormac hoped the man would not remember who had given him that scar in battle; but the Gael's dark beard had grown thickly, and Thorleif had given no sign of recognition since the opening of negotiations.

"What is a wench to you," said Cormac, "even a noble one, to a hold full of riches? Bring the lady forth, and we'll lay the gold at your feet."

"The gold first," grunted Thorleif. "If it's not enough, I'll keep her."

"Who will pay you more," said Donal, "than her own brother? Your raids will bring you wenches aplenty, even noble ones; but the price offered you by the noble Marcus, Atalanta's brother, is far greater than another would pay, as you must well know."

"Aye," said Marcus, "and if you'll not accept this lavish sum, I'll spend a greater to return with a fleet that'll sweep this island clean of pirates! By Christ, when Rome was in power..."

Thorleif laughed; Cormac laid a hand on Marcus' shoulder.

"Rome is dead!" roared the Viking. "And not even at the height of her power did her rule touch these islands. But you are a headstrong youth. If you could

bring an army here, why do you come now with this single shipload of Danish pirates? Bah! bring forth your gold, and I'll decide whether it's worthy to ransom the Lady Atalanta and her maid."

Cormac signalled the group of Danes clustered about the long ship, and a dozen of them lifted burdens and trudged up the beach toward the debating parties.

" 'Ware a trap," growled one of Thorleif's aides—a lean, hard sea-wolf. "We be but twenty here, and with this approaching twelve they will outnumber us."

"Well, then—" Thorleif raised his hand, and twenty men detached themselves from those ranks by the fortress-wall, striding down the beach to join the score or so that already formed his band. Cormac felt a twinge of suspicion. Then Thorleif turned to the Viking Thorfinn and said: "I recognize your ship, the *Raven*—it belonged to my enemy Wulfhere Hausakluifr. How came you into possession of it?"

"Wulfhere was my captain," said Thorfinn, "but he wronged me and I split his skull in combat."

The dozen men from the Danish ship joined the group and let fall their burdens on the beach. Knives ripped open the cloth bags and a glittering profusion of gold-wrought works of art and sparkling jewelry spilled out on the sand.

"This is a ransom worthy of a princess," said

Donal, "not merely a noble lady. Give us Atalanta and we shall go in peace."

The eyes of Thorleif Hordi's son lit up at the sight of so much gold and jewelry. "Let it be so," he said, and Cormac relaxed slightly. The twenty-odd men who had detached themselves from the ranked warriors near the wall had now joined Thorleif's group; the Gael now saw that in their midst was a woman of surpassing beauty, and he knew that she could be none other than the princess Helen..Yet as she drew closer he saw that her white garments were torn—her dark hair was in disarray—her beautiful features were strained as if in agony, and her wide dark eyes seemed to burn with a hopeless yearning, a mute appeal mingled with a near-hopeless resignation.

"Helen!"

The girl looked up at the sound of Marcus' involuntary cry; her face suddenly lost its look of hopeless apathy and took on an expression of animation and joy. Then, before her guards could stop her, she leaped away and dashed across the narrow space between the two opposing groups and threw herself into her lover's arms.

"Marcus—oh Marcus, help me!" she cried. "They tortured Marcia—O God! They made her tell all, and then they killed her—and they mean to kill you. Flee, Marcus—flee! It's a trap!"

Suddenly Cormac saw, too late, that the men who had joined Thorleif's delegation were not Vikings but—Jutes. In the fore-front of them stood Halfgar Wolf's-tooth—and Cormac suddenly realized that the twenty-odd men who had joined Thorleif's party were the survivors of the Juttish ship *Fire-Woman*.

"Fools!" roared Thorleif. "I knew who you were from the start of your thievish bargainings. These Juttish wolves sailed night and day to beat you here, for a wounded member of their crew overheard what Marcus learned from the dying carle. Aye, the princess Helen, daughter of Gerinth, is she you seek to regain—deny it not, for Halfgar and I learned it from the lips of the maid Marcia ere she died under the torture. And now you shall die also, Cormac Mac Art, and your fool chieftain who doubtless hides amid his red-bearded carles by the long ship. I shall have your treasure, your long ship, the princess Helen—and the head of Wulfhere!"

Marcus, only half-comprehending what was said, looked up from Helen's tear-stained face and realized that Thorleif and Halfgar were the ones who had tortured the girl beyond endurance. With a frantic roar he unsheathed his sword and drove straight at Thorleif. The Viking chief laughed as he drew his own blade and parried the youth's frantic stroke.

"Devil!" shrieked Marcus. "I'll have your heart...."

Thorleif laughed again as his blade parried Marcus' once more and shattered the youth's sword like glass. Marcus sprang for the Viking with a fury equal to the Norseman's berserker-rage, and only Cormac's sword, intercepting Thorleif's whistling blade, saved the youth from a split skull; as it was, the Gael's blade was shattered to flinders as well. Then Marcus leaped and his fingers locked about Thorleif's throat; the bearlike Viking gasped at the steely grip of the youth's fingers, at the desperate strength and ferocity of the Briton who was scarcely half his weight, and tried to cry out in terror, but felt his windpipe choked off. Dropping his sword, useless at these close quarters, he battered with his massive fists at the youth's rib-cage till Marcus fell back, half conscious yet still clutching at the Viking's bull neck...

The Norsemen rushed in and Cormac, striving to save Marcus from the bull-like Thorleif, was driven back. A fierce blond warrior swung at him with an axe; Cormac's shield fended off the blow but his broken sword left him helpless to retaliate; then, as the Viking hove up his axe for another stroke, Donal's blade darted in to pierce the links of his scale armor and the warrior crashed to the earth like a fallen tree. Cormac saw a Juttish warrior leaping toward Donal like a maddened wolf; with all his strength he sprang and interposed his battered shield between Donal and the Jute's axe. The arching blade crashed through the

lifted shield and Cormac cried out involuntarily as pain lanced his left arm; then Donal's sword slashed in a silvery arc and the Juttish carle fell with his head half-severed, blood spurting from his heart-veins while his last dying war-cry turned abruptly to bloody gurglings from his sundered windpipe.

Battle-cries rang out and the clash of steel filled the air. Cormac rose shakily as the battle surged about him; his right hand clutched the hilt of a broken sword, his shield hung shattered on his bleeding left arm. He saw, amid the press of fighting-men around him, Thorleif Hordi's son contending against Wulfhere's captain Thorfinn, who held his ground with valor while Marcus attempted to crawl away with the fainting Helen. Then, even as Cormac watched, a dying Jute slashed across Thorfinn's ankles with a dagger and the Dane fell—and as he fell Thorleif's blade lashed out and split his skull. Donal was engaged with the lean Viking who was Thorlief's lieutenant, and Cormac saw with horror that Thorleif Hordi's son was about to cleave the defenseless Marcus in half as he strove to hurry Helen to safety. Without thinking Cormac roared and launched himself toward the Viking; Thorleif wheeled and, seeing the Gael charging him with shattered blade and broken shield, laughed aloud and hove his sword aloft for the death-stroke...

Cormac wheeled and dodged the whistling blade

just in time. Then his foot slipped in a patch of beach-slime and he fell sprawling. Thorleif hove up his sword for a final blow—but as he swung it down the blade crashed on an upraised shield and suddenly he was gazing into the blazing eyes of Wulfhere the Skull-splitter.

"Smite again!" roared the Danish chieftain. "Aye, try your steel against another than wounded warriors and helpless women, spawn of Helheim!"

Cormac lurched to his feet and raced to the aid of Marcus; a Norse warrior surged to stop him, but Cormac was beneath the sweep of the man's axe like a cat and his broken sword ripped into his bull-throat.

Thorleif Hordi's son roared with rage and struck with all his might, and his great thick-bladed sword crashed ringingly against the rim of Wulfhere's horned helmet and sent sparks flying. The Danish chief reeled back, half-dazed, and Thorleif rushed in for the kill; but Wulfhere, rallying, roared and swung his axe with all his strength. The axe-blade dipped beneath Thorleif's shield and crunched in through steel mail and into flesh. Thorleif, maddened, lashed back with a blow that clove Wulfhere's shield asunder—but the Dane, bellowing like a wounded bear, gave back a blow of his axe that shore through the Norseman's helmet and split his skull to the jawbone, and Thorleif crashed to the earth like a felled tree.

The battle raged like a maelstrom of steel as the Danes from the long ship rushed to battle with the Norse warriors, who in turn had charged from their position by the stockade-wall. Cormac raced to the side of Marcus, who with the help of Donal was protecting the princess Helen.

"Back to the ship!" yelled Cormac. "Leave the treasure and forget your blood-feuds! Protect the princess!"

The Danes paused in their retreat to draw bow to ear, and at least a score of the charging Norsemen went down before a storm of arrows, somewhat evening the odds—but the rest came on. Halfgar and his Jutes had retreated slightly, but now with their Norse allies at their backs returned to the offense with wild war-cries.

The rushing factions crashed together in a storm of ringing steel; flashing blades ripped through mail and flesh, bones snapped under the impact of mighty blows, and in a moment the beach-stones were slippery with blood while Dane strove against Jute and Norseman in a desperate fury that neither gave nor asked for quarter. Halfgar slew a Dane with a mighty stroke of his axe, then leaped for Donal who was warding the frightened princess. Donal was a competent swordsman but he could not stand before the berserker fury of the Jute's charge; the force of Halfgar's blow against the buckler he threw up barely in time

drove him to his knees. Then the Juttish chief hove up his axe for a killing blow.

Cormac, his sword and shield useless, tensed to charge Halfgar bare-handed—yet knew with a pang of despair that he was too far away to avert the blow that would slay Donal. Then with a roar of rage a hurtling form crashed into the Jute and the two went down together, threshing and snarling. It was Marcus, unarmed, yet in the grip of a berserker-rage as terrible as any Viking's.

Cormac ducked a singing sword-blade, leaped under his attacker's guard and drove his dagger against the warrior's scale-mail with all his strength. The blade snapped—but not before it had ripped through the mail and buried itself deep in the Viking's heart.

Snatching up the fallen warrior's sword and shield, Cormac leaped to where Marcus and Halfgar were battling. The young Briton was having the worst of it; his wounds had weakened him, and his strength was not equal to his fury. Even as Cormac sprang forward Halfgar broke the furious grip of his opponent and smashed the front of his shield into the youth's face; then, even as he shifted his axe to slay the stunned Marcus, the Jute saw a glitter of bright crimson at his feet. It was the gem that had adorned the princess Helen, its slender chain now broken, torn from Marcus during the fight. Halfgar stooped

quickly and snatched it up, hastily looping the chain round his axe-belt. That instant of avarice was all Cormac needed to close the gap and save Marcus from the stroke of a butcher's axe; when the Jute looked up the Gael was already upon him like a whirlwind of fury. He hove up his axe in an instinctive attempt to ward off Cormac's furious stroke, but the sword-blade bit through the handle, sending the axe-head flying, and crashed to fragments on his iron helm. The good metal saved Halfgar's skull but the force of Cormac's blow sent the Jute crashing senseless to the beach.

"Fall back to the ship," yelled Cormac. "Aid here for the prince Marcus!"

Donal rushed to Cormac's aid, and the princess Helen with him, her face white and tearful but strong with a concern that overrode her fear. Ignoring Cormac's bewildered cursings, she helped the minstrel lift the stunned Marcus and bear him away.

The Jutes and Norsemen, having seen both their chieftains fall, had momentarily slackened in their battle-fury; but now, seeing the Danes withdrawing rapidly toward their ship with the hostage British noblewoman in their midst, they surged back to the fight with renewed frenzy. And then, as if in answer to a prearranged signal, the war-cries of a mighty host came roaring from the far end of the beach, beyond when the *Raven* lay with her prow on the sand—and from the forest burst a horde of charging Norsemen

that outnumbered both the contesting groups put together.

"The trap's sprung!" yelled Cormac, raging. "To the ship!"

"Wotan!" Wulfhere scattered a Norseman's brains with a mighty stroke of his axe. "Let your blades drink blood, sons of Dane-mark!"

But even as the retreating Danes reached the prow of their beached ship, Cormac saw it was too late. They had barely time to group themselves into a knot about the bow, with shields overlapping and blades bristling from their ranks like steel quills, when Thorleif's forces smote from both sides like giant ocean waves dashing in fury against a great rock. The Danes raged like giants at Ragnarok in their battle-fury, dealing death to two for every one of their own that was slain, yet even as Cormac raged and slew with the best of them he knew that the odds were too great. They were outnumbered three to one and the newcomers to the battle were fresh. The Danes could not practice their superior archery at these close quarters, nor could they scramble up the sides of their long ship...

Suddenly a howl of fury seemed to shake the skies—a scream of war-fury that welled up from a thousand throats—and then a storm of arrows from all sides darkened the already murky skies. Wooden shafts rattled down like rain and splintered against the

scaled corselets of Dane, Jute and Norseman alike. Cormac saw one of Wulfhere's men reel, his neck transfixed by a dark, flint-tipped arrow; a blond Norse warrior staggered and fell with a similar arrow jutting from his right eye-socket. Most of the shafts that found a mark broke and splintered harmlessly against the bucklers and mail of the Vikings, but all too many out of those hurtling thousands thudded to rest in living flesh.

The Norsemen and Jutes whirled to face this new foe, and Cormac, straining to see above the heads of his enemies, saw the beach in both directions a-swarm with dark, running figures—Picts! Now the arrow-storm ceased and the dark runners, with howls of blood-mad battle frenzy, hurled themselves on the confused outer ranks of the Norsemen.

"Into the ship!" yelled Cormac as the battle-press slackened. "Once there we can hold off both Pict and Norseman with arrow-storm if need be."

The Danes surged over the sides of their long ship, unhindered by the Norsemen who had turned to meet the savage charge of the Picts. A second rain of arrows from the charging Picts swept the deck as the warriors clambered aboard. Donal and Cormac, who had shielded Helen with their bucklers at some risk to themselves, hurried the girl to the hold despite her protests over the safety of Marcus. Wulfhere himself

helped lift the wounded prince to the deck and bear him to safety.

"A sword!" gasped the half-conscious youth. "Give me a sword to slay the damned Jute who tortured my lady's maid before her eyes!"

"Methinks Halfgar is dead," rumbled the Dane gently, admiration for the Briton's courage stirring his fierce soul. "I saw Cormac smite him on the helm in battle, and he rose not from that stroke."

"Then he died too swiftly!" cried Marcus, striving to lift himself from the deck; but Wulfhere held him down firmly.

The surviving Danes were now all aboard ship and ranged with their bows behind the row of shields that lined both rails; but the ship's bow was still grounded on the strand and they could not escape to sea. The Norsemen on shore, rallying from the confusion of the Pictish onslaught, closed ranks and locked shields and began a slow retreat to the stockade where the dark warriors were already swarming in through the open gates. The Picts hurled themselves in screaming fury upon the retreating Norse phalanx, clad only in animal hides and wielding weapons of flint and bronze against the iron mail and blades of the Vikings, seemingly willing to lose three or four men for every Norseman they dragged down to death. Then smoke began to curl up from behind the stockade wall,

and the Vikings roared with dismay as they realized their huts and storehouses were being fired. The phalanx wavered, then broke as the enraged Norsemen charged in frenzied rage toward the skalli, hewing down the naked warriors who barred their path, while the bulk of the Pictish force pursued and harried them through the gates and into the stockade.

A wave of Picts rushed the long ship, but a storm of arrows from Wulfhere's archers drove them back. The dark warriors retreated to the edge of the forest, where they rallied. The Danes tensed for another attack, but it did not come; instead, a flag of truce was raised. Then a half dozen warriors strode down the beach and halted before the prow of the long ship. In their midst was an old man, spare but erect, who wore a robe of wolf-hides ornamented barbarically with the feathered heads of birds and the skulls of animals.

"What do you want?" demanded Cormac in the language of the Picts.

"I am Gonar, High Priest of Pictdom." The old man's voice, though high-pitched, was resonant and strong. "Give us the moon-maid who is to be our sacrifice to Golka, and whom the Jutes stole from us—else we shall burn your ship with fire-arrows."

"There is no moon-maid here," said Cormac.

"We saw her borne aboard your ship," persisted the Pictish priest. "She was brought to us from a land

far to the south, wearing the Blood-stone of the Moon on a golden chain. A generation agone that gem was stolen from its shrine on the Isle of the Altar, and now Golka has sent it back to us about the neck of the sacrifice."

"The ruby!" muttered Donal, who had learned much of the Pictish tongue in his wandering life as a minstrel. "I remember now—Marcus once told me his father found it on a beach amid the wreckage of a Pictish longboat..."

Cormac recalled the red gem Halfgar had snatched up from the sand. Automatically he glanced to the spot where the man had fallen—and saw the Juttish chieftain rising unsteadily to his feet. Evidently Cormac's sword-blow had merely stunned him.

"Give us the girl who bears the Blood-stone," persisted the old man.

"Your god has chosen another for you than her," said Cormac, pointing down the beach. "See, Gonar—that man rising up amid the slain corpses; go to him, and you will find Golka's token."

The old man started, then nodded to the warriors with him, who immediately sprinted off like lean wolves and surrounded Halfgar. Then savage cries of glee rang out as they spied the gem dangling at the Jute's belt. Halfgar drew his dagger and strove to

fight, but the Picts overpowered him easily in his dazed condition and began to bind him with rawhide cords.

"Go then, Danes," cried old Gonar, "and return no more, for this isle belongs to the Pictish clans, and for too long have your Norse brethren ravaged its forests with their axes and sullied its turf with their heavy tread."

Danish warriors swarmed over the gunwales and put their shoulders to the hull; the keel grated upon the beach until the long-ship floated free, and a great shout went up from the Danes as they realized they were seaborne again.

"But the gem," shouted Cormac from the deck as the shore receded,"—surely it is of Rome rather than Pictdom, for I saw the Corinthian symbol graven on its face."

"Not the acanthus," Gonar cried back, "but the Blood of the Sacrifice—the crimson fountain that spurts from the ripped breast to pleasure the heart of Golka of the Moon."

Cormac turned away with a sudden revulsion as the oarsmen swept the craft about and pulled for the clean open sea. Behind him rose a high keening like the wail of a lost soul, and the Gael shuddered as he realized Halfgar had come to full comprehension of his impending fate. Nothing of civilized weakness clung to Cormac's red, barbaric soul—yet something in the

complete raw savagery of the Picts rasped on the armor around his heart.

"Well, you were right, Cormac," rumbled Wulfhere as the shore of the isle of Kaldjorn receded into the murk; "it was ill of me to taunt a defeated man, for my taunts doubtless spurred Halfgar on to vengeance at any price, and in the end it cost me near half my carles. It will take another voyage to Danemark to replenish my crew."

"Halfgar was a treacherous wolf and a torturer of women," said Cormac moodily, "yet he was a brave fighter, and it sits ill with me that a sea-warrior should spill his heart's blood on the altar of Golka of the Moon."

"Well, then," said Donal, "gladden your heart with the happiness in the faces of the princess Helen and her lover Marcus. Look—even under the leaden drizzle of these murky skies their evident joy as they gaze on one another, oblivious to the rest of us, is like the sunrise heralding the return of the gods. Be glad, too, at the thought of the gold King Gerinth will pay you for the safe return of his sister—and knowing the generosity of the man, I doubt not he'll pay you twice what you ask out of joy to see her alive." So saying, the minstrel lifted his ancient Roman lyre, plucked its iron strings and began to sing:

Picts stole King Gerinth's sister fair
And the king knew black despair.
"'Las, what can I do?" cried he.
"Foes assail by land and sea;
"Warriors I have none to spare.
"Thieves have ta'en my sister fair."

Then to the king his minstrel came:
"Wulfhere's crew of Viking-fame
"Rests for a space in yonder bay;
"Stout of heart and true be they.
"Even to Ocean's utmost lair
"They'll ply to find your sister fair."

The King, his face a-streak with tears,
Bared to the Viking-men his fears.
"By Wotan!" Wulfhere roared, "my blade
"Shall cleave the rogues who stole the maid."
Then quoth black Cormac wrathfully:
"They'll face the Tigers of the Sea!"

Far on the roaring, wind-wracked tide
The dragon-ship of the rovers plied.
Juttish dragons barred their way;
Then did the tigers rend and slay.
Thorwald died 'neath Wulfhere's steel—
See, how the hungry raven's wheel!

Anon they sailed to Kaldjorn's strand
Where Thorleif with his mighty band
Held the fair maid in bondage sore.
"Ho, ho!" quoth Hordi's son, "no more
"The shores of your native land you'll see."
And the poor maid wept bitterly.

Then Kaldjorn felt the dragon's keel
And the tigers raged with fangs of steel.
Wulfhere roared with joy of battle—
Norsemen fell to's blade like cattle.
Thorleif's skull he clove in twain;
Long his rovers heaped the slain.

Now Pict and raven prowl the strand
Where the Norse lie heaped on the crimson sand;
The rovers ply from their valiant raid
With an empty hold and a joyful maid.
And Briton's king most happily
Shall greet the Tigers of the Sea.

"By Thor, Donal!" roared Wulfhere gruffly, his great eyes a-swim with tears. " 'Tis a song for the gods! Sing it again—aye, and this time forget not how I turned Thorleif's blow aside and shore through his mail with my axe. What think you, Cormac—is it not a good song?"

Cormac gazed broodingly toward the shore,

where flames from the burning skalli were now glimmering redly through the murk.

"Aye, it's a good song, I'll not gainsay it. But already it differs in ways from the things I saw, and I doubt not the difference will grow with each singing. Well, it matters little—the world itself shifts and changes and fades to mist like the strains of a minstrel's harp, and mayhap the dreams we forge are more enduring than the works of kings and gods."

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SWORDS OF THE NORTHERN SEA

SWORDS OF THE NORTHERN SEA

"Skoal!" The smoke-stained rafters shook as the deep-throated roar went up. Drinking horns clashed and sword hilts beat upon the oaken board. Dirks hacked at the great joints of meat, and under the feet of the revelers gaunt, shaggy wolf-hounds fought over the remnants.

At the head of the board sat Rognor the Red, scourge of the Narrow Seas. The huge Viking meditatively stroked his crimson beard, while his great, arrogant eyes roved about the hall, taking in the familiar scene. A hundred warriors feasted here, waited on by bold-eyed, yellow-haired women and by trembling slaves. Spoils of the Southland were flung about in careless profusion. Rare tapestries and brocades, bales of silk and spice, tables and benches of fine mahogany, curiously chased weapons and delicate masterpieces or art vied with the spoils of the hunt—horns and heads of forest beasts. Thus the Viking proclaimed his mastery over man and beast.

The Northern nations were drunken with victory and conquest. Rome had fallen; Frank, Goth, Vandal and Saxon had looted the fairest possessions of the world. And now these races found themselves hard put to hold their prizes from the wilder, fiercer peoples who swept down on them from the blue mists of the North. The Franks, already settled in Gaul and beginning to show signs of Latinization, found the long, lean galleys of the Norsemen bringing the sword up their rivers; the Goth further south felt the weight of their kinsmen's fury and the Saxons, forcing the Britons westward, found themselves assailed by a more furious foe from the rear. East, west and south to the ends of the world ranged the dragon-beaked long ships of the Vikings.

The Norse had already begun to settle in the Hebrides and the Orkneys, though as yet it was more a rendezvous of pirates than the later colonization. And the lair of Rognor the Red was this isle, called by the Scots Ladbhan, the Picts Golmara and the Norse Valgaard. His word was law, the only law this wild horde recognized; his hand was heavy, his soul ruthless, his range the open world.

The sea-king's eyes ranged about the board, while he nodded slightly in satisfaction. No pirate that sailed the seas could boast a fiercer assortment of fighting men than he; a mixed horde they were, Norsemen and Jutes—big, yellow-bearded men with wild, light

eyes. Even now as they feasted they were fully armed and girt in mail, though they had laid aside their horned helmets. A ferocious, wayward race they were, with a latent madness burning in their brains, ready to leap into terrible flame at an instant.

Rognor's gaze turned from them, with their great bare arms heavy with golden armlets, to rest on one who seemed strangely different from the rest. This was a tall, rangily built man, deep-chested and strong, whose square-cut black hair and dark, smooth face contrasted with the yellow manes and beards about him. This man's eyes were narrow slits and of a cold-steel grey, and they, with a number of scars that marred his face, lent him a peculiarly sinister aspect. He wore no gold ornaments of any kind and his mail was of chain mesh instead of the scale type worn by the men about him.

Rognor frowned abstractedly as he eyed this man, but just as he was about to speak, another man entered the huge hall and approached the head of the board. This newcomer was a tall, splendidly made young Viking, beardless but wearing a yellow mustache. Rognor greeted him.

"Hail, Hakon! I have not seen you since yesterday."

"I was hunting wolves in the hills," answered the young Viking, glancing curiously at the dark stranger. Rognor followed his gaze.

"That is one Cormac Mac Art, chief of a band of reivers. His galley was wrecked in the gale last night and he alone won through the breakers to shore. He came to the skalli doors early in the dawn, dripping wet, and argued the carles into bringing him in to me instead of slaying him as they had intended. He offered to prove his right to follow me on the Viking path, and fought my best swordsmen, one after the other, weary as he was. Rane, Tostig and Halfgar he played with as they were children and disarmed each without giving scathe or taking a wound himself."

Hakon turned to the stranger and spoke a courtly greeting, and the Gael answered in kind, with a stately inclination of his head.

"You speak our language well," said the young Viking.

"I have many friends among your people," answered Cormac. Hakon's eyes rested on him strangely for a moment, but the inscrutable eyes of the Gael gave back the gaze, with no hint of what was going on in his mind.

Hakon turned back to the sea-king. Irish pirates were common enough in the Narrow Seas, and their forays carried them sometimes as far as Spain and Egypt, though their ships were far less seaworthy than the long ships of the Vikings. But there was little friendship between the races. When a reiver met a

Viking, generally a ferocious battle ensued. They were rivals of the Western seas.

"You have come at a good time, Cormac," Rognor was rumbling. "You will see me take a wife tomorrow. By the hammer of Thor! I have taken many women in my time—from the people of Rome and Spain and Egypt, from the Franks, from the Saxons, and from the Danes, the curse of Loki on them! But never have I married one before. Always I tired of them and gave them to my men for sport. But it is time I thought of sons and so I have found a woman, worthy even of the favors of Rognor the Red. Ho—Osric, Eadwig, bring in the British wench! You shall judge for yourself, Cormac."

Cormac's eyes roved to where Hakon sat. To the casual watcher the young Viking seemed disinterested, almost bored. But the Gael's stare centered on the angle of his firm jaw as he caught the sudden, slight ripple of muscle that betrays controlled tenseness. The Gael's cold eyes flickered momentarily.

Three women entered the feasting-hall, closely followed by the two carles Rognor had sent for them. Two of the women led the third before Rognor, then fell back, leaving her facing him alone.

"See, Cormac," rumbled the Viking: "is she not fit to bear the sons of a king?"

Cormac's eyes traveled impersonally up and

down the girl who stood panting with anger before him. A fine, robust figure of young womanhood she was, quite evidently not yet twenty years old. Her proud bosom heaved with angry defiance, and her bearing was that of a young queen rather than a captive. She was clad in the rather scanty finery of a Norse woman, but she was quite apparently not of their race. With her blond hair and blazing blue eyes, coupled with her snowy skin, she was evidently a Celt; but Cormac knew that she was not one of the softened and Latinized people of southern Britain. Her carriage and manner were as free and barbaric as that of her captors.

"She is the daughter of a chief of the western Britons," said Rognor; "one of a tribe that never bowed the neck to Rome and now, hemmed between the Saxons on one side and the Picts on the other, holds both at bay. A fighting race! I took her from a Saxon galley, whose chief had in turn taken her captive during an inland raid. The moment I laid eyes on her, I knew she was the girl who should bear my sons. I have held her now for some months, having her taught our ways and language. She was a wildcat when we first caught her! I gave her in charge of old Eadna, a very she-bear of a woman—and by the hammer of Thor, the old valkyrie nearly met her match! It took a dozen birchings across old Eadna's knee to tame the spit-fire—"

"Are you done with me, pirate?" flamed the girl

suddenly, defiantly, yet with a tearful catch, barely discernible, in her voice. "If so, let me go back to my chamber—for the hag-face of Eadna, ugly as it is, is more pleasant to my sight than your red-bearded swine-face!"

A roar of mirth went up, and Cormac grinned thinly.

"It seems that her spirit is not utterly broken," he commented dryly.

"I would not count her worth a broken twig if it were," answered the sea-king, unabashed. "A woman without mettle is like a scabbard without a sword. You may return to your chamber, my pretty one, and prepare for your nuptials on the morrow. Mayhap you will look on me with more favor after you have borne me three or four stout sons!"

The girl's eyes snapped blue fire, but without a word she turned her back squarely on her master and prepared to leave the hall—when a voice suddenly cut through the din:

"Hold!"

Cormac's eyes narrowed as a grotesque and abhorrent figure came shambling and lurching across the hall. It was a creature with the face of a mature man, but it was no taller than a young boy, and its body was strangely deformed with twisted legs, huge malformed feet and one shoulder much higher than the other. Yet the fellow's breadth and girth were

surprising; a stunted, malformed giant he seemed. From a dark, evil face gleamed two great, yellow eyes.

"What is this?" asked the Gael. "I knew you Vikings sailed far, but I never heard that you sailed to the gates of Hell. Yet surely this thing had its birth nowhere else."

Rognor grinned. "Aye, in Hell I caught him, for in many ways Byzantium is Hell, where the Greeks break and twist the bodies of babes that they may grow into such blasphemies as this, to furnish sport for the emperor and his nobles. What now Anzace?"

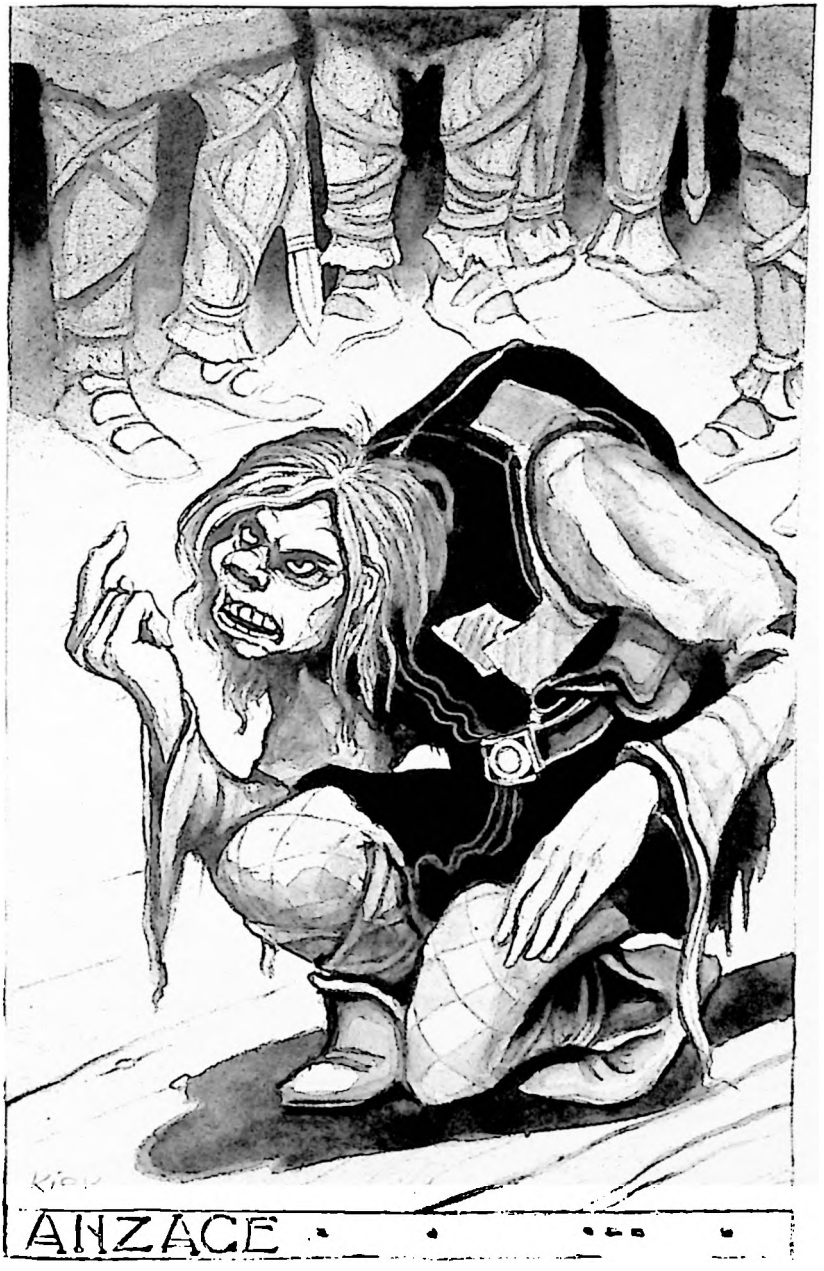
"Great lord," wheezed the creature in a shrill, loathly voice, "tomorrow you take this girl, Tarala, to wife—is it not? Aye—oh, aye! But, mighty lord, what if she loves another?"

Tarala had turned back and now bent on the dwarf a wide-eyed stare in which aversion and anger vied with fear.

"Love another?" Rognor drank deep and wiped his beard. "What of it? Few girls love the men they have to marry. What care I for her love?"

"Ah," sneered the dwarf, "but would you care if I told you that one of your own men talked to her last night—aye, and for many nights before that—through the bars of her window?"

Down crashed the drinking-jack. Silence fell over the hall and all eyes turned toward the group at the head of the table. Hakon rose, flushing angrily.


ANZACE

"Rognor—" his hand trembled on his sword—"if you will allow this vile creature to insult your wife-to-be, I at least—"

"He lies!" cried the girl, reddening with shame and rage. "I—"

"Be silent!" roared Rognor. "You, too, Hakon. As for you—" his huge hand shot out and closed like a vise on the front of Anzace's tunic—"speak, and speak quickly. If you lie—you die!"

The dwarf's dusky hue paled slightly, but he shot a spiteful glance of reptilian malice toward Hakon. "My lord," said he, "I have watched for many a night since I first saw the glances this girl exchanged with he who has betrayed you. Last night, lying close among the trees without her window, I heard them plan to flee tonight. You are to be robbed of your fine bride, master."

Rognor shook the Greek as a mastiff shakes a rat. "Dog!" he roared. "Prove this or howl under the blood-eagle!"

"I can prove it," purred the dwarf. "Last night I had another with me—one whom you know is a speaker of truth. Tostig!"

A tall, cruel-visaged warrior came forward, his manner one of sullen defiance. He was one of those on whom Cormac had proved his swordsmanship.

"Tostig," grinned the dwarf, "tell our master whether I speak truth—tell him if you lay in the bushes

with me last night and heard his most trusted man—who was supposed to be up in the hills hunting—plot with this yellow-haired wench to betray their master and flee tonight."

"He speaks truth," said the Norseman sullenly.

"Odin, Thor and Loki!" snarled Rognor, flinging the dwarf from him and crashing his fist down on the board. "And who was the traitor?—tell me, that I may break his vile neck with my two hands!"

"Hakon!" screamed the dwarf, a quivering finger stabbing at the young Viking, his face writhing in a horrid contortion of venomous triumph. "Hakon, your right hand man!"

"Aye, Hakon it was," growled Tostig.

Rognor's jaw dropped, and for an instant a tense silence gripped the hall. Then Hakon's sword was out like a flash of summer lightning and he sprang like a wounded panther at his betrayors. Anzace screeched and turned to run, and Tostig drew back and parried Hakon's whistling stroke. But the fury of that headlong attack was not to be denied. Hakon's single terrific blow shivered Tostig's sword and flung the warrior at Rognor's feet, brains oozing from his cleft skull. At the same time Tarala, with the desperate fury of a tigress, snatched up a bench and dealt Anzace such a blow as to stretch him stunned and bleeding on the floor.

The whole hall was in an uproar. Warriors roared

their bewilderment and indecision as they shouldered each other and snarled out of the corners of their mouths, gripping their weapons and quivering with eagerness for action, but undecided which course to follow. Their two leaders were at variance, and their loyalty wavered. But close about Rognor were a group of hardened veterans who were assailed by no doubts. Their duty was to protect their chief at all times and this they now did, moving in a solid hedge against the enraged Hakon who was making a most sincere effort to detach the head of his former ally from its shoulders. Left alone, the matter might have been in doubt, but Rognor's vassals had no intention of leaving their chief to fight his own battles. They closed in on Hakon, beat down his guard by the very weight of their numbers and stretched him on the floor, bleeding from a dozen minor cuts, where he was soon bound hand and foot. All up and down the hall the rest of the horde was pressing forward, exclaiming and swearing at each other, and there was some muttering and some black glances cast at Rognor; but the sea-king, sheathing the great sword with which he had been parrying Hakon's vicious cuts, pounded on the board and shouted ferociously. The insurgents sank back, muttering, quelled by the blast of his terrific personality.

Anzace rose, glassy-eyed and holding his head. A great, bleak woman had wrested the bench away from

Tarala and now held the blond girl tucked under her arm like an infant, while Tarala kicked and struggled and cursed. In the whole hall there was but one person who seemed not to share the general frenzy—the Gaelic pirate, who had not risen from his seat where he sipped his ale with a cynical smile.

"You would betray me, eh?" bellowed Rognor, kicking his former lieutenant viciously. "You whom I trusted, whom I raised to high honor—" Words failed the outraged sea-king and he brought his feet into play again, while Tarala shrieked wrathful protests:

"Beast! Thief! Coward! If he were free you would not dare!"

"Be silent!" roared Rognor.

"I will not be silent!" she raged, kicking vainly in the old woman's grasp. "I love him! Why should I not love him in preference to you? Where you are harsh and cruel, he is kind. He is brave and courteous, and the only man among you that has treated me with consideration in my captivity. I will marry him or no other—"

With a roar Rognor drew back his iron fist, but before he could crash it into that defiant, beautiful face, Cormac rose and caught his wrist. Rognor grunted involuntarily; the Gael's fingers were like steel. For a moment the Norseman's flaming eyes glared into the cold eyes of Cormac and neither wavered.

"You cannot marry a dead woman, Rognor," said Cormac coolly. He released the other's wrist and resumed his seat.

The sea-king growled something in his beard and shouted to his grim vassals: "Take this young dog and chain him in the cell; tomorrow he shall watch me marry the wench, and then *she* shall watch while with my own hands I cut the blood-eagle in his back."

Two huge carles stolidly lifted the bound and raging Hakon, and as they started to bear him from the hall, he fell suddenly silent and his gaze rested full on the sardonic face of Cormac Mac Art. The Gael returned the glance, and suddenly Hakon spat a single word: "Wolf!"

Cormac did not start; not by the flicker of an eyelash did he betray any surprise. His inscrutable gaze did not alter as Hakon was borne from the hall.

"What of the wench, master?" asked the woman who held Tarala captive. "Shall I not strip her and birch her?"

"Prepare her for the marrying," growled Rognor with an impatient gesture. "Take her out of my sight before I lose my temper and break her white neck!"

A torch in a niche of the wall flickered, casting an indistinct light about the small cell, whose floor was of dirt and whose walls and roof were of square-cut logs. Hakon the Viking, chained in the corner furthest from

the door, just beneath the small, heavily-barred window, shifted his position and cursed fervently. It was neither his chains nor his wounds which caused his discomfiture. The wounds were slight and had already begun to heal—and, besides, the Norsemen were inured to unbelievable physical discomforts. Nor was the thought of death what made him writhe and curse. It was the reflection that Rognor was going to take Tarala for his unwilling bride and that he, Hakon, was unable to prevent it...

He froze as a light, wary step sounded outside. Then he heard a voice say, with an alien accent: "Rognor desires me to talk with the prisoner."

"How do I know you speak truth?" grumbled the guard.

"Go and ask Rognor; I will stand guard while you go. If he flays your back for disturbing him, don't blame me."

"Go in, in the name of Loki," snarled the guard. "But do not tarry too long."

There was a fumbling of bolts and bars; the door swung open, framing a tall, lithe form; then it closed again. Cormac Mac Art looked down at the prostrate Hakon. Cormac was fully armed, and on his head he wore a helmet with a crest ornamented with flowing horse hair. This seemed to make him inhumanly tall and, in the flickering, illusive light which heightened

the darkness and sinisterness of his appearance, the Gaelic pirate seemed not unlike some sombre demon come to taunt a captive in a shadowy corner of Hell.

"I thought you would come," said Hakon, rising to a sitting position. "Speak softly, however, lest the guard outside hear us."

"I came because I wished to know where you learned my language," said the Gael.

"You lie," replied Hakon cheerfully. "You came lest I betray you to Rognor. When I spoke the name men have given you, in your own tongue, you knew that I knew who you really were. For that name means 'Wolf' in your language, and you are not only Cormac Mac Art of Erin, but you are Cormac the Wolf, a reiver and a killer, and the right-hand man of Wulfhere the Dane, Rognor's greatest enemy. What you are doing here I know not, but I do know that the presence of Wulfhere's closest comrade means no good for Rognor. I have but to say a word to the guard and your fate is as certain as mine."

Cormac looked down at the youth and was silent for a moment.

"I might cut your throat before you could speak," he said.

"You might," agreed Hakon, "but you won't. It is not in you to slay a defenseless man thus."

Cormac grinned bleakly. "True. What would you have of me?"

"My life for yours. Get me free and I keep your secret till Ragnarok."

Cormac seated himself on a small stool and meditated.

"What are your plans?"

"Free me—and let me get my hands on a sword. I'll steal Tarala and we will seek to gain the hills. If not, I'll take Rognor with me to Valhalla."

And if you gain the hills?"

"I have men waiting there—fifteen of my closest friends, Jutes, mainly, who have no love for Rognor. On the other side of the island we have hidden a longboat. In it we can win to another island where we can hide from Rognor until we have a band of our own. Masterless men and runaway carles will come to us and it may not be long until I can burn Rognor's skalli over his head and pay him back for his kicks."

Cormac nodded. In that day of pirates and raiders, outlaws and reivers, such a thing as Hakon suggested was common enough.

"But first you must escape from this cell."

"That is your part," rejoined the youth.

"Wait," said the Gael. "You say you have fifteen friends in the forest—"

"Aye—on pretext of a wolf hunt we went up into the hills yesterday and I left them at a certain spot, while I slipped back and made the rest of my plans with Tarala. I was to spend the day at the skalli, and

then, pretending to go for my friends tonight, I was to ride forth, returning stealthily and stealing Tarala. I reckoned not on Anzace, that Byzantium he-witch, whose foul heart, I swear, I will give to the kites—"

"Enough," snapped Cormac impatiently. "Have you any friends among the carles now in the steading? Methought I noted some displeasure among them at your rough handling."

"I have a number of friends and half-friends," answered Hakon, "but they waver—a carle is a stupid animal and apt to follow whoever seems strongest. Let Rognor fall, with his band of chosen henchmen, and the rest would likely as not join my forces."

"Good enough." Cormac's eyes glittered as his keen brain began racing with an idea. "Now, listen—I told Rognor truth when I said my galley was dashed on the rocks last night—but I lied when I said only I escaped. Well hidden beyond the southern point of this island, where the sand spits run out into the surf, is Wulfhere with fifty-odd swordsmen. When we fought through the madness of the breakers last night and found ourselves ashore with no ship and only a part of our band left alive—and on Rognor's island—we took council and decided that I, whom Rognor was less likely to know, should go boldly up to his skalli and, getting into his favor, look for a chance to outwit him and seize one of his galleys. For it is a ship we want. Now I will bargain with you. If I help you to escape,

will you join your forces with mine and Wulfhere's and aid us to overthrow Rognor? And, having overthrown him, will you give us one of his long ships? That is all we ask. The loot of the skalli and all Rognor's carles and the rest of his ships shall be all yours. With a good long ship under our feet, Wulfhere and I will soon gain plunder enough—aye, and Vikings for a full crew."

"It is a bargain," promised the youth. "Aid me and I aid you; make me lord of this island with your help and you shall have the pick of the long ships."

"Good enough; now attend me. Is your guard likely to be changed tonight?"

"Scarcely, I think."

"Think you he could be bribed, Hakon?"

"Not he. He is one of Rognor's picked band."

"Well, then we must try some other way. If we can dispose of him, your escape will hardly be discovered before morning. Wait!"

The Gael stepped to the door of the cell and spoke to the guard.

"What sort of a watchman are you, to leave a way of escape for your prisoner?"

"What mean you?" The Viking's beard bristled.

"Why, all the bars have been torn from the window."

"You are mad!" growled the warrior, entering the cell. He raised his head to stare at the window, and

even as his chin rose at an angle following his eyes, Cormac's iron fist, backed by every ounce of his mighty body, crashed against the Viking's jaw. The fellow dropped like a slaughtered ox, senseless.

The key to Hakon's chains were at the guard's girdle. In an instant the young Viking rose, free of his bonds, and Cormac, having gagged the unconscious warrior and chained him in turn, handed it to Hakon who grasped it eagerly. No word was said as the two stole from the cell and into the shadows of the surrounding trees. There Cormac halted. He eyed the steading keenly. There was no moon but the starlight was sufficient for the Gael's purposes.

The skalli, a long rambling structure of logs, faced the bay where Rognor's galleys rode at anchor. Grouped about the main building in a rough half circle were the store houses, the huts of the carles and the stables. A hundred or so yards separated the nearest of these from the skalli, and the hut wherein Hakon had been pent was the furthest away from the hall. The forest pressed closely on three sides, the tall trees overshadowing many of the store houses. There was no wall or moat about Rognor's steading. He was sole lord of the island and expected no raid from the land side. At any rate, his steading was not intended as a fortress but as a sort of camp from which he swooped down on his victims.

While Cormac was taking in all salient points, his

quick ears caught a stealthy footstep. Straining his eyes, he glimpsed the hint of a movement under the thick trees. Beckoning Hakon, he crept silently forward, dirk in hand. The brooding shadows masked all, but Cormac's wild beast instinct, that comes to men who live by their wits, told him that someone or something was gliding through the darkness close at hand. A twig snapped faintly some little distance away, and then, a moment later, he saw a vague shape detach itself from the blackness of the trees and drift swiftly toward the skalli. Even in the dimness of the starlight the creature seemed abnormal and uncanny.

"Anzace!" hissed Hakon, electrified. "He was hiding in the trees, watching the cell! Stop him, quickly!"

Cormac's grip on his arm stayed him from springing out recklessly in pursuit.

"Silence!" hissed the Gael. He knows you are free, but he may not know we know it. We have yet time before he reaches Rognor."

"But Tarala!" exclaimed Hakon fiercely. "I'll not leave her alone here now. Go if you will—I'll steal her away now, or die here!"

Cormac glanced quickly toward the skalli. Anzace had vanished around the corner. Apparently he was making for the front entrance.

"Lead to the girl's chamber," growled Cormac. "It's a desperate chance—but Rognor might cut her

throat when he learns we've fled, before we could return and rescue her."

Hakon and his companion, emerging from the shadows, ran swiftly across the open starlit space which parted the forest from the skalli. The young Norseman led the way to a heavily barred window near the rear end of the long, rambling hall. Crouching there in the shadows of the building, he rapped cautiously on the bars, three times. Almost instantly Tarala's white face was framed dimly in the aperture.

"Hakon!" came the passionate whisper. "Oh, be careful! Old Eadna is in the room with me. She is asleep, but—"

"Stand back," whispered Hakon, raising his sword. "I'm going to hew these bars apart—"

"The clash of metal will wake every carle on the island," grunted Cormac. "We have a few minutes leeway while Anzace is telling his tale to Rognor. Let you not throw it away."

"But how else—?"

"Stand away," growled the Gael, gripping a bar in each hand and bracing his feet and knees against the wall. Hakon's eyes widened as he saw Cormac arch his back and throw every ounce of his incredible frame into the effort. The young Viking saw the great muscles writhe and ripple along the Gael's arms, shoulders and legs; the veins stood out on Cormac's

temples, and then, before the astounded eyes of the watchers the bars bent and gave way, literally torn from their sockets. A dull, rending crash resulted, and in the room someone stirred with a startled exclamation.

"Quick, through the window!" snapped Cormac fiercely, galvanized back into dynamic action in spite of the terrific strain of his feat.

Tarala flung one limb over the shattered sill—then there sounded a low, fierce exclamation behind her and a quick rush. A pair of thick, clutching hands closed on the girl's shoulders—and then, twisting about, Tarala struck a heavy blow. The hands went limp and there was the sound of a falling body. In another instant the British girl was out of the window and in the arms of her lover.

"There!" she gasped breathlessly, half sobbing, throwing aside the heavy wine goblet with which she had knocked her guard senseless. "That pays old Eadna back for some of the spankings she gave me!"

"Haste!" rapped Cormac, urging the pair toward the forest. "The whole steading will be roused in a moment—"

Already lights were flaring and Rognor's bull voice was heard bellowing. In the shadows of the trees Cormac halted an instant.

"How long will it take you to reach your men in the hills and return here?"

"Return here?"

"Yes."

"Why—an hour and a half at the utmost."

"Good!" snapped the Gael. "Conceal your men on yonder side of the clearing and wait until you hear this signal—"And he cautiously made the sound of a night bird thrice repeated.

"Come to me—alone—when you hear that sound—and take care to avoid Rognor and his men as you come—"

"Why—he'll most certainly wait until morning before he begins searching the island—"

Cormac laughed shortly. "Not if I know him. He'll be out with all his men combing the woods tonight. But we've wasted too much time—see, the steading is a-swarm with armed warriors. Get your Jutes back here as soon as you may. I'm for Wulfhere."

Cormac waited until the girl and her lover had vanished in the shadows, then he turned and ran fleetly and silently as the beast for which he was named. Where the average man would have floundered and blundered through the shadows, caroming into trees and tripping over bushes, Cormac sped lightly and easily, guided partly by his eyes, mainly by his unerring instinct. A lifetime in the forests and on the seas of the wild northern and eastern countries had given him the thews, wits and endurance of the fierce beasts that roamed there.

Behind him he heard shouts, clashing of arms and a bloodthirsty voice roaring threats and blasphemies. Evidently Rognor had discovered that both his birds had flown. These sounds grew fainter as he rapidly increased the distance between, and presently the Gael heard the low lapping of waves against the sand bars. As he approached the hiding-place of his allies, he slackened his pace and went more cautiously. His Danish friends lacked somewhat of his ability to see in the dark, and the Gael had no wish to stop an arrow intended for an enemy.

He halted and sounded the low pitched call of the wolf. Almost instantly came an answer, and he went forward with more assurance. Soon a vague huge figure rose in the shadows in front of him and a rough voice accosted him.

"Cormac—by Thor, we had about decided you failed to trick them—"

"They are slow witted fools," answered the Gael. "But I know not if my plan shall succeed. We are only some seventy to over three hundred."

"Seventy—why—?"

"We have some allies now—you know Hakon, Rognor's mate?"

"Aye."

"He has turned against his chief and now moves against him with fifteen Jutes—or will shortly. Come, Wulfhere, order out the warriors. We go to throw the

dice of chance again. If we lose, we gain an honorable death; if we win, we gain a goodly long ship, and you—vengeance!"

"Vengeance!" murmured Wulfhere softly. His fierce eyes gleamed in the starlight and his huge hand locked like iron about the handle of his battle-axe. A red-bearded giant was the Dane, as tall as Cormac and more heavily built. He lacked something of the Gael's tigerish litheness but he made up for that in oak-and-iron massiveness. His horned helmet increased the barbaric wildness of his appearance.

"Out of your dens, wolves!" he called into the darkness behind him. "Out! No more skulking for Wulfhere's killers—we go to feed the ravens. Osric—Halfgar—Edric—Athelgard—Aslaf—out, wolves, the feast is ready!"

As if born from the night and the shadows of the brooding trees, the warriors silently took shape. There were few words spoken and the only sounds were the occasional rattle of a belt chain or the rasp of a swinging scabbard. Single file they trailed out behind their leaders, and Cormac, glancing back, saw only a sinuous line of great, vague forms, darker shadows amid the shadows, with a swaying of horns above. To his imaginative Celtic mind it seemed that he led a band of horned demons through the midnight forest.

At the crest of a small rise, Cormac halted so

suddenly that Wulfhere, close behind, bumped into him. The Gael's steel fingers closed on the Viking's arm, halting his grumbled question. Ahead of them came a sudden murmer and a rattle of weapons, and now lights shone through the trees.

"Lie down!" hissed Cormac, and Wulfhere obeyed, growling the order back to the men behind. As one man, they prostrated themselves and lay silently. The noise grew louder swiftly, the tramp of many men. Presently into view came a motley horde of men, waving torches as they scanned all sides of the sullen forest, whose menacing darkness the torches but accentuated. They were following a dim trail which cut across Cormac's line of march. In front of them strode Rognor, his face black with passion, his eyes terrible. He gnawed his beard as he strode, and his great sword trembled in his hand. Close behind him came his picked swordsmen in a compact, immobile-faced clump, and behind them the rest of the carles strung out in a straggling horde.

At the sight of his enemy Wulfhere shivered as with a chill. Under Cormac's restraining hand the great thews of his arm swelled and knotted into ridges of iron.

"A flight of arrows, Cormac," he urged in a passionate whisper, his voice heavy with hate. "Let's loose a rain of shafts into them and then lash in with the blades—"

"No, not now!" hissed the Gael. "There are nearly three hundred men with Rognor. He is playing into our hands and we must not lose the chance the gods have given us! Lie still and let them pass!"

Not a sound betrayed the presence of the fifty-odd Danes as they lay like the shadow of Doom above the slope. The Norsemen passed at right angles and vanished in the forest beyond without having seen or heard anything of the men whose fierce eyes watched them. Cormac nodded grimly. He had been right when he assumed that Rognor would not wait for the dawn before combing the island for his captive and her abductor. Here in this forest, where fifty-odd men could escape the eyes of the searchers, Rognor could scarcely have hoped to find the fugitives. But the fury that burned in the Norseman's brain would not allow him to keep still while those who defied him were still at liberty. It was not in a Viking to sit still when fired with rage, even though action were useless. Cormac knew these strange, fierce people better than they knew themselves.

Not until the clash of steel had died out in the forest beyond, and the torchlights had become mere fireflies glimpsed occasionally through the trees, did Cormac give the order to advance. Then at double quick time they hastened on, until they saw more lights ahead of them, and presently, crouching beneath the tall trees at the edge of the clearing,

looked out on the steading of Rognor the Red. The main skalli and many of the smaller buildings were alight but only a few warriors were seen. Evidently Rognor had taken most of his carles with him on his useless chase.

"What now, Cormac?" said Wulfhere.

"Hakon should be here," answered Cormac. Even as he opened his mouth to give the signal agreed upon, a carle rounded the corner of a stable close by, carrying a torch. The watchers saw him alter his leisurely pace suddenly and glance fixedly in their direction. Some motion in the deep shadows had attracted his attention.

"What cursed luck!" hissed Wulfhere. "He's coming straight for us. Edric—lose me an arrow—"

"No," muttered Cormac, "never kill, Wulfhere, save when it is necessary. Wait!"

The Gael faded back into the darkness like a phantom. The carle came straight for the forest edge, waving his torch slightly, curious, but evidently not suspicious. Now he was under the trees and his outthrust fagot shone full on Wulfhere, where the huge Dane stood in grim silence, motionless as a statue.

"Rognor!" The flickering light was illusive; the carle saw only a red-bearded giant. "Back so soon? Have you caught—?"

The sentence broke off abruptly as he saw the red beards and fierce, unfamiliar faces of the silent men

ranged behind Wulfhere; his gaze switched back to the chief and his eyes flared with sudden horror. His lips parted, but at that instant an iron arm hooked about his throat, strangling the threatened yell. Wulfhere knocked the torch from his hand and stamped it out, and in the darkness the carle was disarmed and bound securely with his own harness.

"Speak low and answer my questions," sounded a sinister whisper at his ear. How many weapon-men are there left at the steading?"

The carle was brave enough in open battle, but the suddenness of the surprise had unnerved him, and here in the darkness, surrounded by his ruthless hereditary foes, with the demonic Gael muttering at his shoulder, the Norseman's blood turned to ice.

"Thirty men remain," he answered.

"Where are they?"

"Half of them are in the skalli. The rest are in the huts."

"Good enough," grunted the Gael. "Gag him and bring him along with us. Now wait here until I find Hakon."

He gave the cry of a sleepy bird, thrice repeated, and waited a moment. The answer came drifting back from the woods on the other side of the clearing.

"Stay here," ordered the Gael, and melted from the sight of Wulfhere and his Danes like a shadow.

Cautiously he made his way around the fringe of

the forest, keeping well hidden in the trees, and presently a slight rustling noise ahead of him made him aware that a body of men lurked before him. He sounded the signal again, and presently heard Hakon whisper a sibilant warning. Behind the young Viking the Gael made out the vague forms of his warriors.

"By the gods," muttered Cormac impatiently, "you make enough noise to wake Caesar. Surely the carles had investigated but that they thought you a herd of buffalo—who is this?"

By Hakon's side was a slim figure, clad in mail and armed with a sword, but strangely out of place among the giant warriors.

"Tarala," answered Hakon. "She would not stay hidden in the hills—so I found a corslet that she could wear and—"

Cormac cursed fervently. "Well—well. Now attend me closely. See you yon hut—the one wherein you were confined? Well, we are going to set fire to it."

"But, man," exclaimed Hakon, "the flame will bring Rognor on the run!"

"Exactly; that is what I wish. Now when the fire brings the carles running, you and your Jutes sally from the forest and fall upon them. Cut down as many as you can, but the moment they rally and make head against you, fall back into the stables, which you can easily do. If you work it right, you should do this without losing a man. Then, once inside the stable, bar

and bolt the doors and hold it against them. They will not set fire to it, because many fine horses are there, and you with your men can hold it easily against thirty."

"But what of you and your Danes?" protested Hakon. "Are we to bear all the brunt and danger, while—"

Cormac's hand shot out and his steely fingers sank fiercely in Hakon's shoulder.

"Do you trust me or do you not?" he snarled. "By the blood of the gods, are we to waste the night in argument? Do you not see that so long as Rognor's men think they have only you to deal with, the surprise will be triply effective when Wulfhere strikes? Worry not—when the time comes my Danes will drink blood a-plenty."

"Well enough," agreed Hakon, convinced by the dynamic impact of the Gael's will, "but you must have Tarala with you, out of harm's way for the time—"

"Never!" cried the girl, stamping her small foot. "I shall be at your side, Hakon, as long as we both live. I am the daughter of a British prince and I can wield a sword as well as any of your men!"

"Well," Cormac grinned thinly, "easy to see who'll be the real ruler in your family—but come, we have no time to waste. Leave her here with your men for now."

As they glided through the shadows, Cormac

repeated his plans in a low voice, and soon they stood at the point where the forest most nearly approached the hut that served as Rognor's prison. Warily they stole from the trees and swiftly ran to the hut. A large tree stood just without the door and as they passed under it, something bumped heavily against Cormac's face. His quick hand grasped a human foot and, looking up in surprise, he made out a vague figure swaying limply to and fro above him.

"Your jailor!" he grunted. "That was ever Rognor's way, Hakon—when in anger, hang the first man handy. A poor custom—never kill except when necessary."

The logs of the hut were dry, with much bark still on them. A few seconds' work with flint and steel and a thin wisp of flame caught the shredded fibre and curled up the wall.

"Back to your men, now," muttered Cormac, "and wait until the carles are swarming about the huts. Then hack straight through them and gain the stables."

Hakon nodded and darted away. A few minutes more found Cormac back with his own men, who were muttering restlessly as they watched the flames eat their way up the wall of the hut. Suddenly a shout sounded from the skalli. Men came pouring out of the main hall and the huts, some fully armed and wide awake, some gaping and half clad as though just

awakened from a sound sleep. Behind them peered the women and slaves. The men snatched buckets of water and ran for the hut and in a moment the scene was one of the usual confusion attendant to a fire. The carles jostled each other, shouted useless advice and made a vain attempt to stem the flame which now leaped roaring up through the roof and curled high in a blaze that was sure to be seen by Rognor wherever he was.

And in the midst of the turmoil there sounded a fierce medley of yells and a small, compact body of men crashed from the forest and smote the astonished carles like a thunderbolt. Hacking and hewing right and left, Hakon and his Jutes cleft their way through the bewildered Norsemen, leaving a wake of dead and dying behind them.

Wulfhere trembled with eagerness and behind him his Danes snarled and tensed like hunting dogs straining at the leash.

"How now, Cormac," cried the Viking chief, "shall we not strike a blow? My axe is hungry!"

"Be patient, old sea-wolf," grinned Cormac savagely. "Your axe shall drink deep; see, Hakon and his Jutes have gained the stable and shut the doors."

It was true. The Norsemen had recovered from their surprise and prepared to turn on their attackers with all the fury that characterized their race, but before they could make any headway, Hakon and his

men had disappeared inside the stable whence came the neighing and stamping of frightened horses.

This stable, built to withstand the inroads of hunger-maddened wolves and the ravages of a Baltic winter, was a natural fortress, and against its heavy panels the axes of the carles thundered in vain. The only way into the building was through the windows. The heavy wooden bars that guarded these were soon hacked away, but climbing through them in the teeth of the defenders' swords was another. After a few disasterous attempts, the survivors drew off and consulted with each other. As Cormac had reasoned, burning the stable was out of the question because of the blooded horses within. Nor was a flight of arrows through the windows logical. All was dark inside the stable and a chance flown shaft was more likely to hit a horse than a man. Outside, however, the whole steading was lit like day by the burning hut; the Jutes were not famed as archers, but there were a few bows among Hakon's men and these did good execution among the men outside.

At last a carle shouted: "Rognor will have seen the fire and be returning—Olaf, run you and meet him, and tell him Hakon and his Jutes are pent in the stable. We will surround the place and keep them there until Rognor gets here. Then we shall see!"

A carle set off at full speed and Cormac laughed softly to himself.

"Just what I was hoping for! The gods have been good to us this night, Wulfhere! But back—further into the shadows, lest the flames discover us."

Then followed a tense time of waiting for all concerned—for the Jutes imprisoned in the stable, for the Norsemen lying about it, and for the unseen Danes lurking just within the forest edge. The fire burnt itself out and the flames died in smoking embers. Away in the east shone the first touch of dawn. A wind blew up from the sea and stirred the forest leaves. And through the woods echoed the tramp of many men, the clash of steel and deep angry shouts. Cormac's nerves hummed like taut lute strings. Now was the crucial moment. If Rognor's men passed from the forest into the clearing without seeing their hidden foes, all was well. Cormac made the Danes lie prone and, with heart in his mouth, waited.

Again came the glimmer of torches through the trees, and with a sigh of relief Cormac saw that Rognor was approaching the steading from another direction than that he had taken in leaving it. The motley horde broke cover almost opposite the point where Cormac and his men lay.

Rognor was roaring like a wild bull and swinging his two-handed sword in great arcs.

"Break down the doors!" he shouted. "Follow me—shatter the walls!"

The whole horde streamed out across the clear-

ing, Rognor and his veterans in the lead.

Wulfhere had leaped to his feet and his Danes rose as a man behind him. The chief's eyes were blazing with battle-lust.

"Wait!" Cormac thrust him back. "Wait until they are pounding at the doors!"

Rognor's Vikings crashed headlong against the stable. They bunched at the windows, stabbing and hacking at the blades that thrust from within. The clash of steel rose deafeningly, frightened horses screamed and kicked thunderously at their stalls, while the heavy doors shook to the impact of a hundred axes.

"Now!" Cormac leaped to his feet, and across the clearing swept a sudden storm of arrows. Men went down in windrows, and the rest turned bewilderedly to face this sudden and unguessed foe. The Danes were bowmen as well as swordsmen; they excelled all other nations of the North in this art. Now as they leaped from their hiding place, they loosed their shafts as they ran with unerring aim. But the Norsemen were not ready to break yet. Seeing their red-maned foes charging them, they supposed, dazedly, that a great host was upon them, but with the reckless valor of their breed they leaped to meet them.

Driving their last flight of shafts point-blank, the Danes dropped their bows and leaped into close quar-

ters, yelling like fiends, to slash and hack with swords and axes.

They were far outnumbered, but the surprise told heavily and the unexpected arrows had taken terrific toll. Still Cormac, slashing and thrusting with reddened sword, knew that their only chance lay in a quick victory. Let the battle be drawn out and the superior numbers of the Norse must win. Hakon and his Jutes had sallied from the stable and were assailing their former mates from that side. There in the first white light of dawn was enacted a scene of fury.

Rognor, thought Cormac as he mechanically dodged an axe and ran the wielder through, must die quickly if the coup he wished for was to be brought about.

And now he saw Rognor and Wulfhere surging toward each other through the waves of battle. A Dane, thrusting savagely at the Norseman, went down with a shattered skull, and then with a thunderous yell of fury the two red-bearded giants crashed together. All the pent up ferocity of years of hatred burst into flame, and the opposing hordes halted their own fight mutually to watch their chieftains battle.

There was little to choose between them in size and strength. Rognor was armed with a great sword that he swung in both hands, while Wulfhere bore a long-shafted axe and a heavy shield. That shield was

rent in twain beneath Rognor's first incredible stroke, and tossing the fragments away, Wulfhere struck back and hewed one of the horns from the Norseman's helmet. Rognor roared and cut terrifically at Wulfhere's legs, but the huge Dane, with a quickness astounding in a man of his bulk, bounded high in the air, cleared the whistling blade and in mid-air chopped down at Rognor's head. The heavy axe struck glancingly on the iron helmet, but even so Rognor went to his knees with a grunt. Then even as the Dane heaved up his axe for another stroke, Rognor was up and his mighty arms brought down his great sword in an arc that crashed full on Wulfhere's helmet. The huge blade shivered with a tremendous crash and Wulfhere staggered, his eyes filling with blood. Like a wounded tiger he struck back with all the might of his gigantic frame, and his blind, terrible stroke cleft Rognor's helmet and shattered the skull beneath. Both hosts cried out at the marvel of that blow as Rognor's corpse tumbled at Wulfhere's feet—and the next instant the blinded giant went down before a perfect storm of swords as Rognor's picked swordsmen rushed to avenge their chief.

With a yell Cormac bounded into the press and his sword wove a web of death above the chief who, having grappled with some of his attackers, now kicked and wrestled with them on the bloody earth.

The Danes surged in to aid their leaders, and about the fallen chieftains eddied a whirlpool of steel. Cormac found himself opposed to Rane, one of Rognor's prize swordsmen, while Hakon battled with his mate, Halfgar. Cormac laughed; he had crossed swords with Rane, a lean shaggy wolf of a man, that morning and he knew all he wished to know about him. A quick parry of an overhand stroke, a dazzling feint to draw a wide lunge, and the Gael's sword was through the Viking's heart.

Then he turned to Hakon. The young Viking was hard pressed; Halfgar, a giant, taller than Wulfhere, towered over him, raining terrific blows upon his shield so swiftly Hakon could make no attempt to launch an offensive of his own. An unusually vicious stroke beat his helmet down over his eyes and for an instant he lost touch of his opponent's blade. In that instant he would have died, but a slim, girlish figure leaped in front of him and took the blow on her own blade, the force of it dashing her to her knees. Up went the giant's sword again—but at that second Cormac's point pierced his bull throat just above the mail.

Then the Gael wheeled back, just as a powerful carle raised an axe high above the still prostrate Wulfhere. The point was Cormac's favorite, but that he could use the edge as well he proved by splitting the carle's skull to the chin. Then, grabbing Wulfhere's

shoulders, he hauled him off the men he was seeking to throttle and dragged him, cursing and bellowing like a bull, out of the press.

A quick glance showed him that Rognor's veterans had fallen before the axes of the Danes, and that the rest of the Norsemen, seeing their chief fall, had renewed the fight only half-heartedly. Then what he had hoped for occurred. One of the Norsemen shouted: "The woods are full of Danes!" And the strange, inexplicable panic that sometimes seizes men gripped the carles. Shouting, they gave back and fled for the skalli in a straggling body. Wulfhere, shaking the blood out of his eyes and bellowing for his axe, would have hurled his men after them, but Cormac stopped him. His shouted commands kept the Danes from following the fugitives, who were fortified in the skalli and ready to sell their lives as dearly as only cornered men can.

Hakon, prompted by Cormac, shouted to them: "Ho, warriors, will ye listen to me?"

"We listen, Hakon," came back a shout from the barred windows, "but keep back; mayhap we be doomed men, but many shall die with us if you seek to take the skalli."

"I have no quarrel with you," answered Hakon. "I look upon you as friends, though you allowed Rognor to bind and imprison me. But that is past; let it be forgotten. Rognor is dead; his picked veterans are

dead and ye have no leader. The forest about the steading swarms with Danes who but await my signal. But that signal I am loath to give. They will burn the skalli and cut the throats of every man, woman and child among you. Now attend me—if you will accept me as your chieftain, and swear fealty to me, no harm will come to you."

"What of the Danes?" came the shouted question. "Who are they that we should trust them?"

"You trust me, do you not? Have I ever broken my word?"

"No," they admitted, "you have always kept faith."

"Good enough. I swear to you that the Danes will not harm you. I have promised them a ship; that promise I must keep if they are to go in peace. But if you follow me on the Viking path, we can soon get another ship or build one. And one thing more—here stands beside me the girl who is to be my wife—the daughter of a British prince. She has promised me the aid of her people in all our endeavors. With friends on the British mainland we can have a source of supplies from whence we can raid the Angles and Saxons to our hearts' content—with the aid of Tarala's Britons we may carve us out a kingdom in Britain as Cerdic, Hengist and Horsa did. Now, speak—will you take me as your chief?"

A short silence followed in which the Vikings

were evidently holding council with each other; then presently their spokesman shouted: "We agree to your wishes, O Hakon!"

Hakon laid down his notched and bloody sword and approached the skalli door empty-handed. "And will you swear fealty to me on the bull, the fire and the sword?"

The great portals swung open, framing fierce, bearded faces. "We will swear, Hakon; our swords are yours to command."

"And when they've found we've tricked them, they'll turn and cut his throat and ours," grunted Wulfhere, mopping the blood from his face.

Cormac smiled and shook his head. "They've sworn, they will keep faith. Are you badly wounded?"

"A trifle," growled the giant. "A gash in the thigh and a few more on the arms and shoulders. It was the cursed blood that got in my eyes when Rognor's sword bit through my helmet and into my scalp, as it broke..."

"Your head's harder than your helmet, Wulfhere," laughed Cormac. "But here, we must be attending to our wounded. Some ten of our men are dead and nearly all of them slashed more or less. Also, some of the Jutes are down. But, by the gods, what a killing *we* have made this night!"

He indicated the stark and silent rows of arrow-feathered or sword-gashed Norsemen.

The sun, not yet in the zenith of the clear blue sky, glimmered on the white sails of a long ship as they spread and swelled to catch the wind. On the deck stood a small group of figures.

Cormac extended his hand to Hakon. "We have hunted together well this night, young sir. A few hours since you were a captive doomed to die and Wulfhere and I were hunted outlaws. Now you are lord of Ladbhan and a band of hardy Vikings, and Wulfhere and I have a staunch ship under our feet—though forsooth, the crew is rather scant. Still, that can be overcome as soon as the Danes hear that Wulfhere and Cormac Mac Art need men.

"And you—" he turned to the girl who stood beside Hakon, still clad in the mail that hung loosely on her lithe form—"you are in truth a valkyrie—a shield woman. Your sons will be kings."

"Aye, that they will," rumbled Wulfhere, enveloping Tarala's slim hand with his own huge paw. "Were I a marrying man, I might cut Hakon's throat and carry you off for myself. But now the wind is rising and my very heart quivers to feel the deck rocking under my feet again. Good fortune attend you all."

Hakon, his bride and the Norsemen attending them swung down into the boat that waited to carry them ashore. At Wulfhere's shout, his Danes cast off; the oars began to ply and the sails filled. The watchers in the boat and on shore saw the long-ship stand off.

"What now, old wolf?" roared Wulfhere, dealing Cormac a buffet between the shoulders that would have felled a horse. "Where away?—it is for you to say."

"To the Isle of Swords, first, for a full crew," the Gael answered, his eyes alight. "Then—" he drank in deeply the crisp strong tang of the sea-wind—"then, *skoal* for the Viking path again and the ends of the world!"

NIGHT OF THE WOLF

THE NIGHT OF THE WOLF

Thorwald Shield-hewer's gaze wandered from the glittering menace in the hard eyes of the man who fronted him, and strayed down the length of his great skalli. He marked the long lines of mailed, horn-helmed carles, the hawk-faced chiefs who had ceased feasting to listen. And Thorwald Shield-hewer laughed.

True, the man who had just flung his defiance into the Viking's teeth did not look particularly impressive beside the armored giants who thronged the hall. He was a short, heavily-muscled man, smooth-faced and very dark. His only garments or ornaments were rude sandals on his feet, a deerskin loincloth, and a broad leather girdle from which swung a short curiously-barbed sword. He wore no armor and his square-cut black mane was confined only by a thin silver band about his temples. His cold black eyes glittered with concentrated fury and his inner passions stirred the expressions of his usually immobile face.

"A year ago," said he, in barbarous Norse, "you came to Golara, desiring only peace with my people. You would be our friend and protect us from the raids of others of your accursed race. We were fools; we dreamed there was faith in a sea-thief. We listened. We brought you game and fish and cut timbers when you built your steading, and shielded you from others of our people who were wiser than we. Then you were a handful with one longship. But as soon as your stockade was built, more of you came. Now your warriors number four hundred, and six dragon-ships are drawn up on the beach.

"Soon you became arrogant and overbearing. You insulted our chiefs, beat our young men—of late your devils have been carrying off our women and murdering our children and our warriors."

"And what would you have me do?" cynically asked Thorwald. "I have offered to pay your chief man-bote for each warrior slain causelessly by my carles. And as for your wenches and brats—a warrior should not trouble himself about such trifles."

"Man-bote!" the dark chief's eyes flashed in fierce anger. "Will silver wash out spilt blood? What is silver to we of the isles? Aye—the women of other races are trifles to you Vikings, I know. But you may find that dealing thus with the girls of the forest people is far from a trifle!"

"Well," broke in Thorwald sharply, "speak your

mind and get hence. Your betters have more important affairs than listening to your clamor."

Though the other's eyes burned wolfishly, he made no reply to the insult.

"Go!" he answered, pointing seaward. "Back to Norge (Norway) or Hell or wherever you came from. If you will take your accursed presence hence, you may go in peace. I, Brulla, a chief of Hjaltland (Shetland Islands), have spoken."

Thorwald leaned back and laughed deeply; his comrades echoed his laughter and the smoky rafters shook with roars of jeering mirth.

"Why, you fool," sneered the Norseman, "do you think that Vikings ever let go of what they have taken hold? You Picts were fools enough to let us in—now we are the stronger. We of the North rule! Down on your knees, fool, and thank the fates that we allow you to live and serve us, rather than wiping out your verminous tribe altogether! But henceforth ye shall no longer be known as the Free People of Golara—nay, ye shall wear the silver collar of thralldom and men shall know ye as Thorwald's serfs!"

The Pict's face went livid and his self-control vanished.

"Fool!" he snarled in a voice that rang through the great hall like the grating of swords in battle. "You have sealed your doom! You Norse rule all nations, eh? Well, there be some who die, mayhap, but never

serve alien masters! Remember this, you blond swine, when the forest comes to life about your walls and you see your skalli crumble in flames and rivers of blood! We of Golara were kings of the world in the long ago when your ancestors ran with wolves in the Arctic forests, and we do not bow the neck to such as you! The hounds of Doom whine at your gates and you shall die, Thorwald Shield-hewer, and you, Aslaf Jarl's-bane, and you, Grimm Snorri's son, and you Osric, and you, Hakon Skel, and—" the Pict's finger, stabbing at each of the flaxen-haired chiefs in turn, wavered; the man who sat next to Hakon Skel differed strangely from the others. Not that he was a whit less wild and ferocious in his appearance. Indeed, with his dark, scarred features and narrow, cold gray eyes, he appeared more sinister than any of the rest. But he was black-haired and clean-shaven, and his mail was of the chain-mesh type forged by Irish armor-makers instead of the scale-mail of the Norse. His helmet, crested with flowing horsehair, lay on the bench beside him.

The Pict passed over him and ended with the pronunciation of doom on the man beyond him—"And you, Hordi Raven."

Aslaf Jarl's-bane, a tall, evil-visaged chief, leaped to his feet: "Thor's blood, Thorwald, are we to listen to the insolence of this jackal? I, who have been the death of a jarl in my day—"

Thorwald silenced him with a gesture. The sea-

king was a yellow-bearded giant, whose eyes were those of a man used to rule. His every motion and intonation proclaimed the driving power, the ruthless strength of the man.

"You have talked much and loudly, Brulla," he said mildly. "Mayhap you are thirsty."

He extended a brimming drinking horn, and the Pict, thrown off guard by surprise, reached a mechanical hand for it, moving as if against his will. Then with a quick turn of his wrist, Thorwald dashed the contents full in his face. Brulla staggered with a catlike scream of hellish fury, then his sword was out like a flash of summer lightning, and he bounded at his baiter. But his eyes were blinded by the stinging ale and Thorwald's quick-drawn sword parried his blind slashes while the Viking laughed mockingly. Then Aslaf caught up a bench and struck the Pict a terrible blow that stretched him stunned and bleeding at Thorwald's feet. Hakon Skel drew his dagger, but Thorwald halted him.

"I'll have no vermin's blood polluting my skalli floor. Ho, carles, drag this carrion forth."

The men-at-arms sprang forward with brutal eagerness. Brulla, half-senseless and bleeding, was struggling uncertainly to his knees, guided only by the wild beast fighting instinct of his race and his Age. They beat him down with shields, javelin shafts and the flat of axes, showering cruel blows on his defense-

less body until he lay still. Then, jeering and jesting, they dragged him through the hall by the heels, arms trailing, and flung him contemptuously from the doorway with a kick and a curse. The Pictish chief lay face down and limply in the reddened dust, blood oozing from his pulped mouth—a symbol of the Viking's ruthless power.

Back at the feasting board, Thorwald drained a jack of foaming ale and laughed.

"I see that we must have a Pict-harrying," quoth he. "We must hunt these vermin out of the wood or they'll be stealing up in the night and loosing their shafts over the stockade."

"It will be a rare hunting!" cried Aslaf with an oath. "We cannot with honor fight such reptiles, but we can hunt them as we hunt wolves—"

"You and your vaporings of honor," sourly growled Grimm Snorri's son. Grimm was old, lean and cautious.

"You speak of honor and vermin," he sneered, "but the stroke of a maddened adder can slay a king—I tell you, Thorwald, you should have used more caution in dealing with these people. They outnumber us ten to one—"

"Naked and cowardly," replied Thorwald carelessly. "One Norseman is worth fifty such. And as for dealing with them, who is it that has been having his carles steal Pictish girls for him? Enough of your mau-

nderings, Grimm. We have other matters to speak of."

Old Grimm muttered in his beard and Thorwald turned to the tall, powerfully-made stranger whose dark, inscrutable face had not altered during all the recent events. Thorwald's eyes narrowed slightly and a gleam came into them such as is seen in the eyes of a cat who plays with a mouse before devouring it.

"Partha Mac Othna," said he, playing with the name, "it is strange that so noted a Reiver as you must be—though sooth to say, I never heard of your name before—comes to a strange steading in a small boat, alone."

"Not so strange as it would have been had I come with a boat-load of my blood-letters," answered the Gael. "Each of them has a half dozen blood feuds with the Norse. Had I brought them ashore, they and your carles would have been at each others' throats spite all you and I could do. But we, though we fight against each other at times, need not be such fools as to forego mutual advantage because of old rivalry."

"True, the Viking folk and the Reivers of Ireland are not friends."

"And so, when my galley passed the lower tip of the island," continued the Gael, "I put out in the small boat, alone, with a flag of peace, and arrived here at sundown as you know. My galley continued to Makki Head, and will pick me up at the same point I left it, at dawn."

"So ho," mused Thorwald, chin on fist, "and that matter of my prisoner—speak more fully, Partha Mac Othna."

It seemed to the Gael that the Viking put undue accent on the name, but he answered: "Easy to say. My cousin Nial is captive among the Danes. My clan cannot pay the ransom they ask. It is no question of niggardliness—we have not the price they ask. But word came to us that in a sea-fight with the Danes off Helgoland you took a chief prisoner. I wish to buy him from you; we can use his captivity to force an exchange of prisoners with his tribe, perhaps."

"The Danes are ever at war with each other, Loki's curse on them. How know you but that my Dane is an enemy to they who hold your cousin?"

"So much the better," grinned the Gael. "A man will pay more to get a foe in his power than he will pay for the safety of a friend."

Thorwald toyed with his drinking horn. "True enough; you Gaels are crafty. What will you pay for this Dane—Hrut, he calls himself."

"Five hundred pieces of silver."

"His people would pay more."

"Possibly. Or perhaps not a piece of copper. It is a chance we are willing to take. Besides, it will mean a long sea voyage and risks taken to communicate with them. You may have the price I offer at dawn—coin you never made more easily. My clan is not rich. The

sea-kings of the North and the strong Reivers of Erin have harried we lesser wolves to the edge of the seas. But a Dane we must have, and if you are too exorbitant, why we must sail eastward and take one by force of arms."

"That might be easy," mused Thorwald, "Danemark is torn by civil wars. Two kings contend against each other—or did, for I hear that Eric had the best of it, and Thorfinn fled the land."

"Aye—so the sea-wanderers say. Thorfinn was the better man, and beloved by the people, but Eric had the support of Jarl Anlaf, the most powerful man among the Danes, not even excepting the kings themselves."

"I heard that Thorfinn fled to the Jutes in a single ship, with a few followers," said Thorwald. "Would that I might have met that ship on the high seas! But this Hrut will serve. I would glut my hate for the Danes on a king, but I am content with the next noblest. And noble this man is, though he wears no title. I thought him a jarl at least, in the sea-fight, when my carles lay about him in a heap waist-high. Thor's blood, but he had a hungry sword! I made my wolves take him alive—but not for ransom. I might have wrung a greater price from his people than you offer, but more pleasant to me than the clink of gold, are the death groans of a Dane."

"I have told you," the Gael spread his hands help-

lessly. "Five hundred pieces of silver, thirty golden torcs, ten Damascus swords we wrested from the brown men of Serkland (Barbary), and a suit of chain-mail armor I took from the body of a Frankish prince. More I cannot offer."

"Yet I can scarce forego the pleasure of carving the blood-eagle in the back of this Dane," murmured Thorwald, stroking his long, fair beard. "How will you pay this ransom—have you the silver and the rest in your garments?"

The Gael sensed the sneer in the tone, but paid no heed.

"Tomorrow at dawn you and I and the Dane will go to the lower point of the island. You may take ten men with you. While you remain on shore with the Dane, I will row out to my ship and bring back the silver and the rest, with ten of my own men. On the beach we will make the exchange. My men will remain in the boats and not even put foot ashore if you deal fairly with me."

"Well said," nodded Thorwald, as if pleased, yet the wolfish instinct of the Gael warned him that events were brewing. There was a gathering tension in the air. From the tail of his eye he saw the chiefs casually crowding near him. Grimm Snorri's son's lined, lean face was overcast and his hands twitched nervously. But no change in the Gael's manner showed that he sensed anything out of the ordinary.

"Yet it is but a poor price to pay for a man who will be the means of restoring a great Irish prince to his clan," Thorwald's tone had changed; he was openly baiting the other now, "besides I think I had rather carve the blood-eagle on his back after all—and on yours as well—*Cormac Mac Art!*"

He spat the last words as he straightened, and his chiefs surged about him. They were not an instant too soon. They knew by reputation the lightning-like coordination of the famous Irish pirate which made his keen brain realize and his steel thews act while an ordinary man would still be gaping. Before the words were fully out of Thorwald's mouth, Cormac was on him with a volcanic burst of motion that would have shamed a starving wolf. Only one thing saved the Shield-hewer's life; almost as quick as Cormac he flung himself backward off the feasting bench, and the Gael's flying sword killed a carle who stood behind it.

In an instant the flickering of swords made lightning in the smoky vastness of the skalli. It had been Cormac's intention to hack a swift way to the door and freedom, but he was hemmed too closely by blood-lusting warriors.

Scarcely had Thorwald crashed cursing to the floor, than Cormac wheeled back to parry the sword of Aslaf Jarl's-bane who loomed over him like the shadow of Doom. The Gael's reddened blade turned Aslaf's stroke and before the Jarl slayer could regain

his balance, death flooded his throat beneath Cormac's slicing point.

A backhand stroke shore through the neck-cords of a carle who was heaving up a great ax, and at the same instant Hordi Raven struck a blow that was intended to sever Cormac's shoulder bone. But the chain-mail turned the Raven's sword edge, and almost simultaneously Hordi was impaled on that glimmering point that seemed everywhere at once, weaving a web of death about the tall Gael. Hakon Skel, hacking at Cormac's unhelmed head, missed by a foot and received a slash across his face, but at that instant the Gael's feet became entangled with the corpses that littered the floor with shields and broken benches.

A concerted rush bore him back across the feasting board, where Thorwald hacked through his mail and gashed the ribs beneath. Cormac struck back desperately, shattering Thorwald's sword and beating the sea-king to his knees beneath the shock of the blow, but a club in the hands of a powerful carle crashed down on the Gael's unprotected head, laying the scalp open, and as he crumpled, Grimm Snorri's son struck the sword from his hand. Then, urged by Thorwald, the carles leaped upon him, smothering and crushing the half-senseless Reiver by sheer weight of manpower. Even so, their task was not easy, but at

last they had torn the steel fingers from the bull throat of one of their number, about which they had blindly locked, and bound the Gael hand and foot with cords not even his dynamic strength could break. The carle he had half-strangled gasped on the floor as they dragged Cormac upright to face the sea-king who laughed in his face.

Cormac was a grim sight. He was red-stained by the blood both of himself and his foes, and from the gash in his scalp a crimson trickle seeped down to dry on his scarred face. But his wild beast vitality already asserted itself and there was no hint of a numbed brain in the cold eyes that returned Thorwald's domineering stare.

"Thor's blood!" swore the sea-king. "I'm glad your comrade Wulfhere Hausakliufr—the Skullsplitter—was not with you. I have heard of your prowess as a killer, but to appreciate it, one must see for himself. In the last three minutes I have seen more weapon-play than I have seen in battles that lasted hours. By Thor, you ranged through my carles like a hunger-maddened wolf through a flock of sheep! Are all your race like you?"

The Reiver deigned no reply.

"You are such a man as I would have for comrade," said Thorwald frankly. "I will forget all old feuds if you will join me." He spoke like a man who

does not expect his wish to be granted.

Cormac's reply was merely a glimmer of cold scorn in his icy eyes.

"Well," said Thorwald, "I did not expect you to accede to my demand, and that spells your doom, because I cannot let such a foe to my race go free."

Then Thorwald laughed: "Your weapon-play has not been exaggerated but your craft has. You fool—to match wits with a Viking! I knew you as soon as I laid eyes on you, though I had not seen you in years. Where on the North Seas is such a man as you, with your height, shoulder-breadth—and scarred face? I had all prepared for you, before you had ceased telling me your first lie. Bah! A chief of Irish Reivers. Aye—once, years ago. But now I know you for Cormac Mac Art *an Cliun,* which is to say the Wolf, right-hand man of Wulfhere Hausakliufr, a Viking of the Danes. Aye, Wulfhere Hausakliufr, hated of my race.

"You desired my prisoner Hrut to trade for your cousin! Bah! I know you of old, by reputation at least. And I saw you once, years ago—you came ashore with a lie on your lips to spy out my steading, to take report of my strength and weaknesses to Wulfhere, that you and he might steal upon me some night and burn the skalli over my head.

"Well, now you can tell me—how many ships has Wulfhere and where is he?"

Cormac merely laughed, a remarkably hard con-

temptuous laugh that enraged Thorwald. The sea-king's beard bristled and his eyes grew cruel.

"You will not answer me, eh?" he swore. "Well, it does not matter. Whether Wulfhere went on to Makki Head or not, three of my dragon ships will be waiting for him off the Point at dawn. Then mayhap when I carve the blood-eagle on Hrut I will have Wulfhere's back also for my sport—and you may look on and see it well done, ere I hang you from the highest tree on Golara. To the cell with him!"

As the carles dragged Cormac away, the Gael heard the querulous, uneasy voice of Grimm Snorri's son raised in petulant dispute with his chief. Outside the door he noted, no limp body lay in the red-stained dust. Brulla had either recovered consciousness and staggered away, or been carried away by his tribesmen. These Picts were hard as cats to kill, Cormac knew, having fought their Caledonian cousins. A beating such as Brulla had received would have left the average man a crippled wreck, but the Pict would probably be fully recovered in a few hours, if no bones had been broken.

Thorwald Shield-hewer's steading fronted on a small bay, on the beach of which were drawn up six long, lean ships, shield-railed and dragon-beaked. As was usual, the steading consisted of a great hall—the skalli—about which were grouped smaller buildings—

stables, storehouses and the huts of the carles. Around the whole stretched a high stockade, built, like the houses, of heavy logs. The logs of the stockade were some ten feet high, set deep in the earth and sharpened on the top. There were loopholes here and there for arrows and at regularly-spaced intervals, shelves on the inner side on which the defenders might stand and strike down over the wall at the attackers. Beyond the stockade the tall dark forest loomed menacingly.

The stockade was in the form of a horseshoe with the open side seaward. The horns ran out into the shallow bay, protecting the dragon ships drawn up on the beach. An inner stockade ran straight across in front of the steading, from one horn to the other, separating the beach from the skalli. Men might swim out around the ends of the main stockade and gain the beach but they would still be blocked from the steading itself.

Thorwald's holdings seemed well protected, but vigilance was lax. Still, the Shetlands did not swarm with sea-rovers then as they did at a later date. The few Norse holdings there were like Thorwald's—mere pirate camps from which the Vikings swooped down on the Hebrides, the Orkneys and Britain, where the Saxons were trampling a fading Roman-Celtic civilization—and on Gaul, Spain and the Mediterranean.

Thorwald did not ordinarily expect a raid from

the sea and Cormac had seen with what contempt the Vikings looked on the natives of the Shetlands. Wulfhere and his Danes were different; outlawed even among their own people, they ranged even farther than Thorwald himself, and they were keen-beaked birds of prey, whose talons tore all alike.

Cormac was dragged to a small hut built against the stockade at a point some distance from the skalli, and in this he was chained. The door slammed behind him and he was left to his meditations.

The Gael's shallow cuts had ceased to bleed, and inured to wounds—an iron man in an Age of iron—he gave them hardly a thought. Stung vanity bothered him; how easily he had slipped into Thorwald's trap, he whom kings had either cursed or blessed for his guile! Next time he would not be so over-confident, he mused; and a next time he was determined there should be. He did not worry overmuch about Wulfhere, even when he heard the shouts, scraping of slides and later the clack of oars that announced that three of Thorwald's longships were under way. Let them sneak to the Point and wait there till the dawn of Doom's Day! Neither he nor Wulfhere had been such utter fools as to trust themselves in the power of Thorwald's stronger force. Wulfhere had but one ship and some eighty men. They and the ship were even now hidden securely in a forest-screened cove on the other side of the island, which was less than a mile wide

at this point. There was little chance of their being discovered by Thorwald's men and the risk of being spied out by some Pict was a chance that must be taken. If Wulfhere had followed their plan, he had run in after dark, feeling his way; there was no real reason why either Pict or Norseman should be lurking about. The shore about the cove was mainly wild, high cliffs, rugged and uninviting; moreover Cormac had heard that the Picts ordinarily avoided that part of the island because of some superstitious reason. There were ancient stone columns on the cliffs and a grim altar that hinted of ghastly rites in bygone ages.

Wulfhere would lurk there until Cormac returned to him, or until a smoke drifting up from the Point assured him that Thorwald was on hand with the prisoner and meaning no treachery. Cormac had carefully said nothing about the signal that was to bring Wulfhere, though he had not expected to be recognized for what he was. Thorwald had been wrong when he assumed that the prisoner had been used only for a blind. The Gael had lied about himself and about his reason for wishing the custody of Hrut, but it was true when he had said that it was news of the Dane's captivity that brought him to Golara.

Cormac heard the cautious oars die away in silence. He heard the clash of arms and the shouts of the carles. Then these noises faded, all but the steady tramp of sentries, guarding against a night attack.

It must be nearly midnight, Cormac decided, glancing up at the stars gleaming through his small heavily-barred window. He was chained close to the dirt floor and could not even rise to a sitting posture. His back was against the rear wall of the hut, which was formed by the stockade, and as he reclined there, he thought he heard a sound that was not of the sighing of the night-wind through the mighty trees without. Slowly he writhed about and found himself staring through a tiny aperture between two of the upright logs.

The moon had already set; in the dim starlight he could make out the vague outline of great, gently-waving branches against the black wall of the forest. Was there a subtle whispering and rustling among those shadows that was not of the wind and the leaves? Faint and intangible as the suggestion of nameless evil, the almost imperceptible noises ran the full length of the stockade. The whole night seemed full of ghostly murmurings—as if the midnight forest were stirring and moving its darksome self, like a shadowy monster coming to uncanny life. "When the forest comes to life," the Pict had said—

Cormac heard, within the stockade, one carle call to another. His rough voice reechoed in the whispering silence.

"Thor's blood, the trolls must be out tonight! How the wind whispers through the trees."

Even the dull-witted carle felt a hint of evil in the darkness and shadows. Gluing his eye to the crack, Cormac strove to pierce the darkness. The Gaelic pirate's faculties were as much keener than the average man's as a wolf's are keener than a hog's; his eyes were like a cat's in the dark. But in that utter blackness he could see nothing but the vague forms of the first fringe of trees. Wait!

Something took shape in the shadows. A long line of figures moved like ghosts just under the shadows of the trees; a shiver passed along Cormac's spine. Surely these creatures were elves, evil demons of the forest. Short and mightily built, half stooping, one behind the other, they passed in almost utter silence. In the shadows their silence and their crouching positions made them monstrous travesties on men. Racial memories, half lost in the misty gulfs of consciousness, came stealing back to claw with icy fingers at Cormac's heart. He did not fear them as a man fears a human foe; it was the horror of world-old, ancestral memories that gripped him—dim felt, chaotic dream-recollections of darker Ages and grimmer days when primitive men battled for supremacy in a new world.

For these Picts were a remnant of a lost tribe—the survivals of an elder epoch—last outposts of a dark Stone Age empire that crumbled before the bronze swords of the first Celts. Now these survivors, thrust out on the naked edges of the world they had once

ruled, battled grimly for their existence.

There could be no accurate counting of them because of the darkness and the swiftness of their slinking gait, but Cormac reckoned that at least four hundred passed his line of vision. That band alone was equal to Thorwald's full strength and far outnumbered the men left in the steading now, since Thorwald had sent out three of his ships. The skulking figures passed as they had come, soundless, leaving no trace behind, like ghosts of the night.

Cormac waited in a silence that had become suddenly tense. Then without warning the night was shattered by one fearful death-yell! Pandemonium broke loose and a mad hell of sound burst on the air. And now the forest came to life! From all sides stocky figures broke cover and swarmed on the barricades. A lurid glare shed a ghastly light over all and Cormac tore savagely at his chains, wild with excitement. Monstrous events were occurring without, and here he was, chained like a sheep for the slaughter! He cursed incredibly.

The Norsemen were holding the wall; the clash of steel rose deafeningly in the night, the hum of arrows filled the air, and the deep fierce shouts of the Vikings vied with the hellish wolf-howling of the Picts. Cormac could not see, but he sensed the surging of human waves against the stockade, the plying of spears and axes, the reeling retreat and the renewed

onset. The Picts, he knew, were without mail and indifferently armed. It was very possible that the limited force of Vikings could hold the stockade until Thorwald returned with the rest, as he would assuredly do when he saw the flame—but whence came the flame?

Someone was fumbling at the door. It swung open and Cormac saw the lean shambling frame and livid bearded face of Grimm Snorri's son limned against the red glare. In one hand he held a helmet and a sword Cormac recognized as his own, in the other a bunch of keys which jangled as his hand shook.

"We are all dead men!" squawked the old Viking, "I warned Thorwald! The woods are alive with Picts! There are thousands of them! We can never hold the stockade until Thorwald returns! He is doomed too, for the Picts will cut him off when he comes into the bay and feather his men with arrows before they can come to grips! They have swum around the outer horns of the stockade and set the three remaining galleys on fire! Osric would run like a fool with a dozen carles to save the ships and he had scarcely gotten outside the gates before he was down with a score of black shafts through him and his men were cut off and hemmed in by a hundred howling demons! Not a man of them escaped, and we barely had time to shut the gates when the whole screaming mob was battering at them!

"We have slain them by the scores, but for every one that drops, three spring to take his place. I have seen more Picts tonight than I knew were on Golara—or in the world. Cormac, you are a bold man; you have a ship somewhere off the isle—swear to save me and I will set you free! Mayhap the Picts will not harm you—that devil Brulla did not name you in his death rune.

"If any man can save me it is you! I will show you where Hrut is hidden and we'll take him with us—" he threw a quick glance over his shoulder toward the roar of battle beachward, and went white. "Thor's blood!" he screamed, "The gates have given way and the Picts are inside the inner stockade!"

The howling rose to a crescendo of demoniac passion and fiendish exultation.

"Loose me, you gibbering fool!" raged Cormac, tearing at his chains. "You've time enough for babbling when—"

Chattering with fear, Grimm Snorri's son stepped inside the hut, fumbling with the keys—even as his foot crossed the threshold a lean shape raced swift and silent as a wolf out of the flame-shot shadows. A dark arm hooked about the old Viking's withered neck, jerking his chin up. One fearful shriek burst from his writhing lips to break short in a ghastly gurgle as a keen edge whipped across his leathery throat.

Over the twitching corpse of his victim, the Pict eyed Cormac Mac Art, and the Gael stared back, expecting death, but unafraid. Then in the glare of the burning ships, that made the cell-hut as light as day, Cormac saw that the slayer was the chief, Brulla.

"You are he who slew Aslaf and Hordi. I watched through the door of the skalli before I dragged myself away to the forests," said the Pict, as calmly as though no inferno of combat was raging without, "I told my people of you and warned them not to harm you, if you still lived. You hate Thorwald as well as I. I will free you; glut your vengeance; soon will Thorwald return in his ships and we will cut his throat. There shall be no more Norse on Golara. All the free people of the isles here-abouts are gathering to aid us, and Thorwald is doomed!"

He bent over the Gael and released him. Cormac sprang erect, a fresh fire of confidence surging through his veins. He snatched his helmet with its flowing horsehair crest, and his long straight sword. He also took the keys from Brulla.

"Know you where was prisoned the Dane called Hrut?" he asked, as they stepped through the door. Brulla pointed across a seething whirlpool of flame and hacking swords.

"The smoke obscures the hut at present, but it lies next the storehouse on that side."

Cormac nodded and set off at a run. Where

Brulla went he neither knew nor cared. The Picts had fired stable, storehouse and skalli, as well as the ships on the beach outside the inner stockade. About the skalli and here and there close to the stockade which was also burning in a score of places, stubborn fighting went on, as the handful of survivors sold their lives with all the desperate ferocity of their breed. There were, indeed, thousands of the short, dark men, who swarmed about each tall blond warrior in a slashing, hammering mass. The heavy swords of the mailed Vikings took fearful toll, but the smaller men lashed in with a wild beast frenzy that made naught of wounds, and pulled down their giant foes by sheet weight of numbers. Once on the ground, the stabbing swords of the dark men did their work. Screams of death and yells of fury rent the flame-reddened skies, but as Cormac ran swiftly toward the storehouse, he heard no pleas for mercy. Driven to madness by countless outrages, the Picts were glutting their vengeance to the uttermost, and the Norse people neither looked nor asked for mercy.

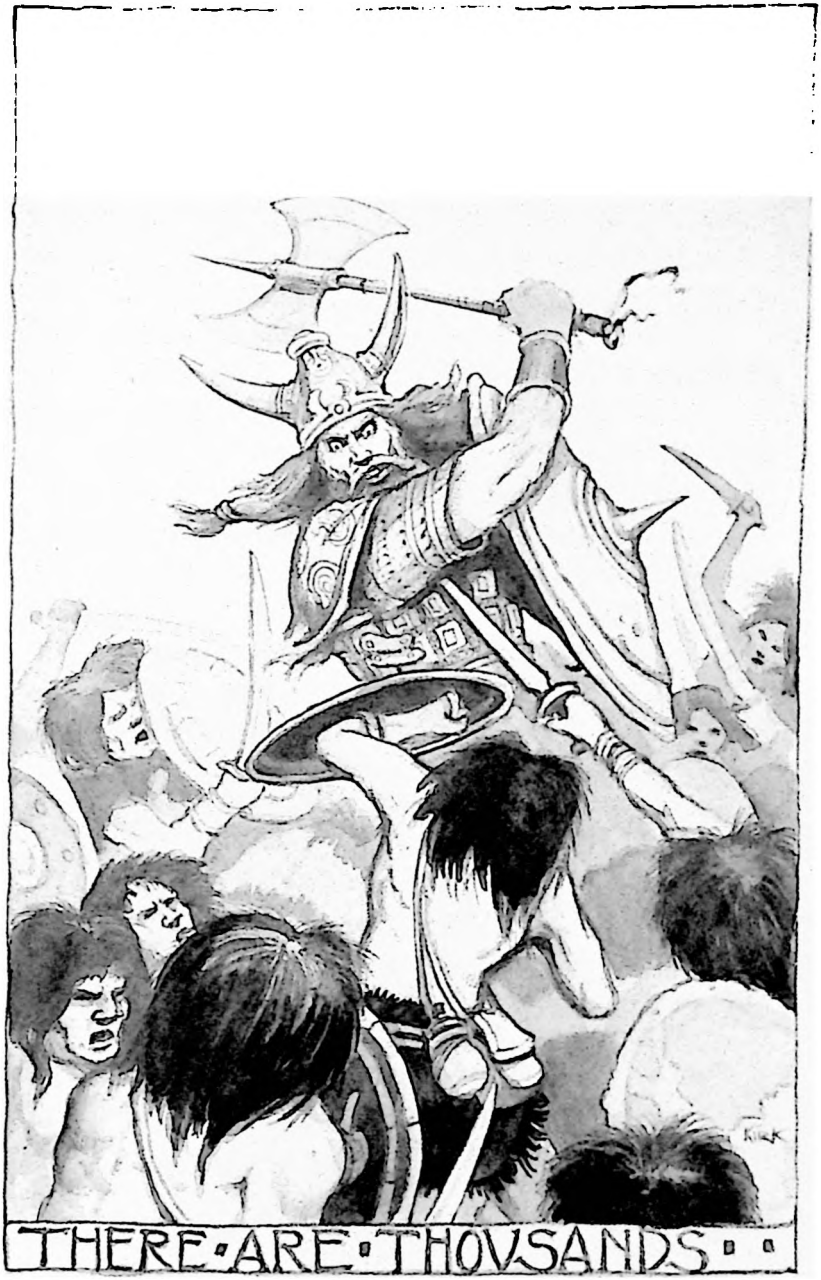
Blond-haired women, cursing and spitting in the faces of their killers, felt the knife jerked across their white throats, and Norse babes were butchered with no more compunction than their sires had shown in the slaughter—for sport—of Pictish infants.

Cormac took no part in this holocaust. None of these people was his friend—either race would cut his

throat if the chance arose. As he ran he used his sword merely to parry chance cuts that fell on him from Pict and Norseman alike, and so swiftly he moved between staggering clumps of gasping, slashing men, that he ran his way across the open space without serious opposition. He reached the hut and a few seconds' work with the lock opened the heavy door. He had not come too soon; sparks from the burning storehouse nearby had caught on the hut thatch and already the interior was full of smoke. Through this Cormac groped his way toward a figure he could barely make out in the corner. There was a jangling of chains and a voice with a Danish accent spoke: "Slay me, in the name of Loki; better a sword thrust than this accursed smoke!"

Cormac knelt and fumbled at his chains. "I come to free you, oh Hrut," he gasped. A moment later he dragged the astonished warrior to his feet and together they staggered out of the hut, just as the roof fell in. Drawing in great draughts of air, Cormac turned and stared curiously at his companion—a splendid, red-maned giant of a man, with the bearing of a noble. He was half-naked, ragged and unkempt from weeks of captivity, but his eyes gleamed with an unconquerable light.

"A sword!" he cried, those eyes blazing as they swept the scene, "A sword, good sir, in the name of Thor! Here is a goodly brawl and we stand idle!"


THERE·ARE·THOVSANDS··

Cormac stooped and tore a reddened blade from the stiffening hand of an arrow-feathered Norseman.

"Here is a sword, Hrut," he growled, "but for whom will you strike—the Norse who have kept you cooped like a caged wolf and would have slain you—or the Picts who will cut your throat because of the color of your hair?"

"There can be but little choice," answered the Dane, "I heard the screams of women—"

"The women are all dead," grunted the Gael. "We cannot help them now; we must save ourselves. It is the night of the wolf—and the wolves are biting!"

"I would like to cross swords with Thorwald," the big Dane hesitated as Cormac drew him toward the flaming barrier.

"Not now, not now," the Reiver rasped, "bigger game is afoot, Thor—Hrut! Later we will come back and finish what the Picts leave—just now we have more than ourselves to think about, for if I know Wulfhere Skullsplitter he is already marching through the woods at double-quick time!"

The stockade was in places a smoldering mass of coals; Cormac and his companion battered a way through and even as they stepped into the shadows of the trees outside, three figures rose about them and set upon them with bestial howls. Cormac shouted a warning, but it was useless. A whirling blade was at his throat and he had to strike to save himself. Turning

from the corpse he had been loath to make, he saw Hrut, bestriding the mangled body of one Pict, take the barbed sword of the other in his left arm and split the wielder's skull with an overhand stroke.

Cursing, the Gael sprang forward. "Are you badly hurt?" Blood was gushing from a deep wound in Hrut's mighty arm.

"A scratch," the Dane's eyes blazed with the battle-light. But despite his protests Cormac tore a strip from his own garments and bound the arm so as to staunch the flow of blood.

"Here, help me drag these bodies under the brush," growled the Reiver. "I hated to strike—but when they saw your red beard it was our lives or theirs. I think Brulla would see our point of view, but if the rest find we killed their brothers neither Brulla nor the devil can keep their swords from our throats."

This done—"Listen!" commanded Hrut. The roar of battle had dwindled in the main to a crackle and roar of flames and the hideous and triumphant yelling of the Picts. Only in a single room in the flaming skalli, yet untouched by the fire, a handful of Vikings still kept up a stubborn defense. Through the noise of the fire there sounded a rhythmic clack-clack-clack!

"Thorwald is returning!" exclaimed Cormac, springing back to the edge of the forest to peer over the ruins of the stockade. Into the bay swept a single

dragon ship. The long ash oars drove her plunging through the water and from her rowers and from the men massed on poop and gunwale rose a roar of deep-toned ferocity as they saw the smoking ruins of the steading and the mangled bodies of their people. From the burning skalli came an echoing shout. In the smoldering glare that turned the bay to a gulf of blood, Cormac and Hrut saw the hawk-face of Hakon Skel where he stood on the poop. But where were the other two ships? Cormac thought he knew and a smile of grim appreciation crossed his somber face.

Now the dragon-ship was sweeping in to the beach and hundreds of screaming Picts were wading out to meet it. Waist deep in water, holding their heavy black bows high to keep the cords dry, they loosed their arrows and a storm of shafts swept the dragon-ship from stem to stern. Full into the teeth of the deadliest gale it had ever faced the dragon-ship drove, while men went down in windrows along the gunwales, transfixed by the long black shafts that rent through lindenwood buckler and scale mail armor to pierce the flesh beneath.

The rest crouched behind their shields and rowed and steered as best they could. Now the keel grated on the water-flooded sand and the swarming savages closed about her. By the hundreds they scrambled up the sides, the stern and the arching prow, while others maintained a steady fire from the water and the

beach. Their marksmanship was almost uncanny. Flying between two slashing Picts a long shaft would strike down a Norseman. But when it came to hand-grips, the advantage was immensely with the Vikings. Their giant stature, their armor and long swords, and their position on the gunwales above their foes made them for the moment invincible.

Swords and axes rose and fell, spattering blood and brains, and stocky shapes dropped writhing from the sides of the galley to sink like stones. The water about the ship grew thick with dead, and Cormac caught his breath as he realized the lavishness with which the naked Picts were spending their lives. But soon he heard their chiefs shouting to them and he realized, as the attackers drew sullenly away, that their leaders were shouting for them to fall back and pick off the Vikings at long range.

The Vikings soon realized that also. Hakon Skel dropped with an arrow through his brain and with yells of fury the Norsemen began leaping from their ship into the water, in one desperate attempt to close with their foes and take toll in death. The Picts accepted the challenge. About each Norseman closed a dozen Picts and the bay along the beach seethed and eddied with battle. The waves grew red as blood and corpses floated thick or littered the bottom, tripping the feet and clogging the arms of the living.

The warriors penned in the skalli sallied forth to die with their tribesmen.

Then what Cormac had looked for, occurred. A deep-chested roar thundered above the fury of the fight, and from the woods that fringed the bay burst Thorwald Shieldhewer, with the crews of two dragon ships at his back. Cormac knew that, guessing what had occurred, he had sent the other ship on to draw the Picts out and give him time to land below the bay and march through the forest with the rest of his men.

Now in a solid formation, shield locking shield, they swept from the woods along the shore and bore down the beach toward their foes. With howls of unquenchable fury, the Picts turned on them with a rain of shafts and a head-long charge of stocky bodies and stabbing blades. But the arrows in the main glanced from the close-lapping shields and the mob-like rush met a solid wall of iron. But with the same desperation they had shown all during the fight, the Picts hurled charge after charge on the shield-wall. It was a living sea that broke in red waves on that iron bulwark. The ground grew thick under foot with corpses, not all Pictish. But as often as a Norseman fell, his comrades locked their great shields close as ever, trampling the fallen under foot. No longer did the Vikings surge forward, but they stood like a solid rock and took not a single backward step. The wings of

their wedge-shaped formation were forced inward as the Picts entirely surrounded them, until it was more like a square, facing all ways. And like a square of stone and iron it stood, and all the wild, blind charges of the Picts failed to shake it, though they hurled their bare breasts against the steel until their corpses formed a wall over which the living clambered.

Then suddenly, apparently without warning, they broke and fled in all directions, some across the flame-lit space of the steading, some into the forest. With yells of triumph the Vikings broke formation and plunged after them, though Cormac saw Thorwald screaming frantic orders and beating at his men with the flat of his reddened sword. A trick! Cormac knew it as well as Thorwald but the blind fighting frenzy of the carles betrayed them as their foes had guessed. The moment they streamed out loosely in pursuit, the Picts turned howling and a dozen Vikings went down before a hail of arrows. Before the rest could reform their position they were surrounded singly and in struggling clumps, and the work of death began. From a single massed battle, the combat became a score of single skirmishes on the beach—where the survivors of the dragon ship had made their way—before the skalli's embers and in the fringe of the forest.

And suddenly as from a dream Cormac woke and cursed himself.

"By the blood of the gods, what a fool I am! Are we boys who have never seen a battle, to stand here gaping when we should be legging it through the forest?"

He was forced to fairly drag Hrut away, and the two ran swiftly through the forest, hearing on all sides the clangor of arms and the shouts of death. The battle had spilled over into the forest and that grim and darksome wood was the scene of many a bloody deed. But Cormac and Hrut, warned by the sounds, managed to keep clear of such struggles, though once vague figures leaped at them from the shadows, and in the blind brief whirl of battle that followed, they never knew whether it was Picts or Norsemen who fell before their swords.

Then the sounds of conflict were behind them and in front sounded the tramp of many men. Hrut stopped short, gripping his red-stained sword, but Cormac pulled him on.

"Men marching in time; they can be none but Wulfhere's wolves!"

The next instant they burst into a glade, dimly lighted by the first whiteness of dawn, and from the opposite side strode a band of red-bearded giants, whose chief, looking like a very god of war, bellowed a welcome:

"Cormac! Thor's blood, it seems we've been marching through these accursed woods forever! When I saw the glow above the trees and heard the yelling I brought every carle on the ship, for I knew not but what you were burning and looting Thorwald's steading single handed! What is forward—and who is this?"

"This is Hrut—whom we sought," answered Cormac. "Hell and the red whirlpools of war are what is forward—there's blood on your axe!"

"Aye—we had to hack our way through a swarm of small, dark fellows—Picts I believe you call 'em."

Cormac cursed. "We'll pile up a blood-score that even Brulla can't answer for—"

"Well," grumbled the giant, "the woods are full of them, and we heard them howling like wolves behind us—"

"I had thought all would be at the steading," commented Hrut.

Cormac shook his head. "Brulla spoke of a gathering of clans; they have come from all the isles of the Hjaltlands and probably landed on all sides of the island—listen!"

The clamor of battle grew louder as the fighters penetrated deeper into the mazes of the forest, but from the way Wulfhere and his Vikings had come there sounded a long-drawn yell like a pack of running wolves, swiftly rising higher and higher.

"Close ranks!" yelled Cormac, paling, and the Danes had barely time to lock their shields before the pack was upon them. Bursting from the thick trees a hundred Picts whose swords were yet unstained broke like a tidal wave on the shields of the Danes.

Cormac, thrusting and slashing like a fiend, shouted to Wulfhere: "Hold them hard—I must find Brulla. He will tell them we are foes of Thorwald and allow us to depart in peace!"

All but a handful of the original attackers were down, trodden under foot and snarling in their death throes. Cormac leaped from the shelter of the overlapping shields and darted into the forest. Searching for the Pictish chief in that battle-tortured forest was little short of madness, but it was their one lone chance. Seeing the fresh Picts coming up from behind them had told Cormac that he and his comrades would probably have to fight their way across the whole island to regain their galley. Doubtless these were warriors from some island lying to the east, who had just landed on Golara's eastern coast.

If he could find Brulla—he had not gone a score of paces past the glade when he stumbled over two corpses, locked in a death-grapple. One was Thorwald Shield-hewer. The other was Brulla. Cormac stared at them and as the wolf-yell of the Picts rose about him, his skin crawled. Then he sprang up and ran back to the glade where he had left the Danes.

Wulfhere leaned on his great ax and stared at the corpses at his feet. His men stolidly held their position.

"Brulla is dead," snapped the Gael. "We must aid ourselves. These Picts will cut our throats if they can, and the gods know they have no cause to love a Viking. Our only chance is to get back to our ship if we can. But that is a slim chance indeed, for I doubt not but that the woods are full of the savages. We can never keep the shield-wall position among the trees, but—"

"Think of another plan, Cormac," said Wulfhere grimly, pointing to the east with his great ax. There a lurid glow was visible among the trees and a hideous medley of howling came faintly to their ears. There was but one answer to that red glare.

"They've found and fired our ship," muttered Cormac. "By the blood of the gods, Fate's dice are loaded against us."

Suddenly a thought came to him.

"After me! Keep close together and hew your way through, if needs be, but follow me close!"

Without question they followed him through the corpse-strewn forest, hearing on each hand the sound of fighting men, until they stood at the forest fringe and gazed over the crumbled stockade at the ruins of the steading. By merest chance no body of Picts had opposed their swift march, but behind them rose a frightful and vengeful clamor as a band of them came

upon the corpse-littered glade the Danes had just left.

No fighting was going on among the steading's ruins. The only Norsemen in sight were mangled corpses. The fighting had swept back into the forest whither the close-pressed Vikings had retreated or been driven. From the incessant clashing of steel within its depths, those who yet remained alive were giving a good account of themselves. Under the trees where bows were more or less useless, the survivors might defend themselves for hours, though, with the island swarming with Picts, their ultimate fate was certain.

Three or four hundred tribesmen, weary of battle at last, had left the fighting to their fresher tribesmen and were salvaging what loot they could from the embers of the storehouses.

"Look!" Cormac's sword pointed to the dragon ship whose prow, driven in the sands, held her grounded, though her stern was afloat. "In a moment we will have a thousand yelling demons on our backs. There lies our one chance, wolves—Hakon Skel's *Raven.* We must hack through and gain it, shove it free and row off before the Picts can stop us. Some of us will die, and we may all die, but it's our only chance!"

The Vikings said nothing, but their fierce light eyes blazed and many grinned wolfishly. Touch and go! Life or death on the toss of the dice! That was a Viking's only excuse for living!

"Lock shields!" roared Wulfhere. "Close ranks! The flying-wedge formation—Hrut in the center."

"What—!" began Hrut angrily, but Cormac shoved him unceremoniously between the mailed ranks.

"You have no armor," he growled impatiently. "Ready old wolf? Then charge, and the gods choose the winners!"

Like an avalanche the steel-tipped wedge shot from the trees and raced toward the beach. The Picts looting the ruins turned with howls of amazement, and a straggling line barred the way to the water's edge. But without slacking gait the flying shield-wall struck the Pictish line, buckled it, crumpled it, hacked it down and trampled it under, and over its red ruins rushed upon the beach.

Here the formation was unavoidably broken. Waist-deep in water, tripping among corpses, harried by the rain of arrows that now poured upon them from the beach, the Vikings gained the dragon ship and swarmed up its sides, while a dozen giants set their shoulders against the prow to push it off the sands. Half of them died in the attempt, but the titanic efforts of the rest triumphed and the galley began to give way.

The Danes were the bowmen among the Viking races. Thirty of the eighty-odd warriors who followed Wulfhere wore heavy bows and quivers of long arrows

strapped to their backs. As many of these as could be spared from oars and sweeps now unslung their weapons and directed their shafts on the Picts wading into the water to attack the men at the prow. In the first light of the rising sun the Danish shafts did fearful execution, and the advance wavered and fell back. Arrows fell all about the craft and some found their marks, but crouching beneath their shields the warriors toiled mightily, and soon, though it seemed like hours, the dragon ship rolled and wallowed free, the men in the water leaped and caught at chains and gunwale, and the long oars drove her out into the bay, just as a howling horde of wolfish figures swept out of the woods and down the beach. Their arrows fell in a rain, rattling harmlessly from shield-rail and hull as the *Raven* shot toward the open sea.

"Touch and go!" roared Wulfhere with a great laugh, smiting Cormac terrifically between the shoulders. Hrut shook his head. To his humiliated anger, a big carle had been told off to keep a shield over him, during the fight.

"Many brave warriors are dying in yonder woods. It pains me to desert them thus, though they are our foes and would have put me to death."

Cormac shrugged his shoulders. "I, too, would have aided them had I seen a way. But we could have accomplished naught by remaining and dying with them. By the blood of the gods, what a night this has

been! Golara is rid of her Vikings, but the Picts paid a red price! All of Thorwald's four hundred are dead now or soon will be, but not less that a thousand Picts have died outright in the steading and the gods only know how many more in the forest."

Wulfhere glanced at Hrut where he stood on the poop, outstretched hand on the sword whose reddened point rested on the deal planking. Unkempt, bloodstained, tattered, wounded, yet still his kingly carriage was unabated.

"And now that you have rescued me so boldly against incredible odds," said he, "what would you have of me besides my eternal gratitude, which you already have?"

Wulfhere did not reply; turning to the men who rested on their oars to gaze eagerly and expectantly up at the group on the poop, the Viking chief lifted his red ax and bellowed: "Skoal, wolves! Yell hail for Thorfinn Eagle-crest, king of Dane-mark!"

A thunderous roar went up to the blue of the morning skies that startled the wheeling sea gulls. The tattered king gasped in amazement, glancing quickly from one to the other, not yet certain of his status.

"And now that you have recognized me," said he, "am I guest or prisoner?"

Cormac grinned. "We traced you from Skagen, whence you fled in a single ship to Helgoland, and

learned there that Thorwald Shield-hewer had taken captive a Dane with the bearing of a king. Knowing you would conceal your identity, we did not expect him to know that he had a king of the Danes in his hands.

"Well, King Thorfinn, this ship and our swords are yours. We be outlaws, both from our own lands. You cannot alter my status in Erin, but you can inlaw Wulfhere and make Danish ports free to us."

"Gladly would I do this, my friends," said Thorfinn, deeply moved. "But how can I aid my friends, who cannot aid myself? I, too, am an outcast, and my cousin Eric rules the Danes."

"Only until we set foot on Danish soil!" exclaimed Cormac. "Oh, Thorfinn, you fled too soon, but who can foresee the future? Even as you put to sea like a hunted pirate, the throne was rocking under Eric's feet. While you lay captive on Thorwald's dragon ship, Jarl Anlaf fell in battle with the Jutes and Eric lost his greatest supporter. Without Anlaf, his rule will crumble overnight and hosts will flock to your banner!"

Thorfinn's eyes lighted with a wondrous gleam. He threw his head back as a lion throws back his mane and flung up his reddened sword into the eye of the rising sun.

"Skoal!" he cried. "Head for Dane-mark, my

friends, and may Thor fill our sail!"

"Aim her prow eastward, carles," roared Wulfhere to the men at the sweeps. "We go to set a new king on the throne of Dane-mark!"

THE TEMPLE OF ABOMINATION

THE TEMPLE OF ABOMINATION

"Easy all," grunted Wulfhere Hausakliufr.-"I see the glimmer of a stone building through the trees.... Thor's blood, Cormac! are you leading us into a trap?"

The tall Gael shook his head, a frown darkening his sinister, scarred face.

"I never heard of a castle in these parts; the British tribes hereabouts don't build in stone. It may be an old Roman ruin—"

Wulfhere hesitated, glancing back at the compact lines of bearded, horn-helmeted warriors. "Maybe we'd best send out a scout."

Cormac Mac Art laughed jeeringly. "Alaric led his Goths through the Forum over eighty years ago, yet you barbarians still start at the name of Rome. Fear not; there are no legions in Britain. I think this is a Druidic temple. We have nothing to fear from them—more especially as we are moving against their hereditary enemies."

"And Cerdic's brood will howl like wolves when

we strike them from the west instead of the south or east." said the Skull-splitter with a grin. "It was a crafty idea of yours, Cormac, to hide our dragon-ship on the west coast and march straight through British country to fall on the Saxons. But it's mad, too."

"There's method in my madness." responded the Gael. "I know that there are few warriors hereabouts; most of the chiefs are gathering about Arthur Pendragon for a great concerted drive. Pendragon—ha! He's no more Uther Pendragon's son than you are. Uther was a black-bearded madman—more Roman than Briton and more Gaul than Roman. Arthur is as fair as Eric there. And he's pure Celt—a waif from one of the wild western tribes that never bowed to Rome. It was Lancelot who put it into his head to make himself king—else he had still been no more than a wild chief raiding the borders."

"Has he become smooth and polished like the Romans were?"

"Arthur? Ha! One of your Danes might seem a gentlewoman beside him. He's a shock-headed savage with a love for battle." Cormac grinned ferociously and touched his scars. "By the blood of the gods, he has a hungry sword! It's little gain we reivers from Erin have gotten on his coasts!"

"Would I could cross steel with him," grunted Wulfhere, thumbing the flaring edge of his great axe. "What of Lancelot?"

"A renegade Gallo-Roman who has made an art of throat-cutting. He varies reading Petronius with plotting and intriguing. Gawaine is a pure-blooded Briton like Arthur, but he has Romanish leanings. You'd laugh to see him aping Lancelot—but he fights like a blood-hungry devil. Without these two, Arthur would have been no more than a bandit chief. He can neither read nor write."

"What of that?" rumbled the Dane. "Neither can I . . . Look—there's the temple."

They had entered the tall grove in whose shadows crouched the broad, squat building that seemed to leer out at them from behind a screening row of columns.

"This can be no temple of the Britons," growled Wulfhere. "I thought they were mostly of a sickly new sect called Christians."

"The Roman-British mongrels are," said Cormac. "The pure Celts hold to the old gods, as do we of Erin. By the blood of the gods, we Gaels will never turn Christian while one Druid lives!"

"What do these Christians?" asked Wulfhere curiously.

"They eat babies during their ceremonies, it is said."

"But 'tis also said the Druids burn men in cages of green wood."

"A lie spread by Caesar and believed by fools!"

rasped Cormac impatiently. "I laud not the Druids especially, but wisdom of the elements and ages is not denied to them. These Christians teach meekness and the bowing of the neck to the blow."

"What say you?" The great Viking was sincerely amazed. "Is it truly their creed to take blows like slaves?"

"Aye—to return good for evil and to forgive their opressors."

The giant meditated on this statement for a moment. "That is not a creed, but cowardice," he decided finally. "These Christians be all madmen. Cormac, if you recognize one of that breed, point him out and I will try his faith." He lifted his axe meaningfully. "For look you," he said, "that is an insidious and dangerous teaching which may spread like rust on the wheat and undermine the manhood of men if it be not stamped out like a young serpent under heel."

"Let me but see one of these madmen," said Cormac grimly, "and I will begin the stamping. But let us see to this temple. Wait here—I'm of the same belief as these Britons, if I am of a different race. These Druids will bless our raid against the Saxons. Much is mummery, but their friendship at least is desirable."

The Gael strode between the columns and vanished. The Hausakliufr leaned on his axe; it seemed to him that from within came a faint rattle—like the

hoofs of a goat on a marble floor.

"This is an evil place," muttered Osric Jarl's-bane. "I thought I saw a strange face peering about the top of the column a moment agone."

"It was a fungous vine grown and twisted about," Black Hrothgar contracted him. "See how the fungus springs up all about the temple—how it twists and writhes like souls in torment—how human-like is its appearance—"

"You are both mad," broke in Hakon Shorri's son. "It was a goat you saw—I saw the horns that grew upon its head—"

"Thor's blood," snarled Wulfhere, "be silent—listen!"

Within the temple had sounded the echo of a sharp, incredulous cry; a sudden, demonic rapping as of fantastic hoofs on marble flags; the rasp of a sword from its scabbard, and a heavy blow. Wulfhere gripped his axe and took the first step of a headlong charge for the portals. Then from between the columns, in silent haste, came Cormac Mac Art. Wulfhere's eyes widened and a slow horror crept over him, for never till this moment had he seen the steel nerves of the lean Gael shaken—yet now the color was gone from Cormac's face and his eyes stared like those of a man who has looked into dark, nameless gulfs. His blade dripped red.

"What in the name of Thor—?" growled Wulfhere, peering fearfully into the shadow-haunted shrine.

Cormac wiped away beads of cold sweat and moistened his lips.

"By the blood of the gods," he said, "we have stumbled upon an abomination—or else I am mad! From the inner gloom it came bounding and capering—suddenly—and it almost had me in its grasp before I had sense enough to draw and strike. It leaped and capered like a goat, but ran upright—and in the dim light it was not unlike a man."

"You are mad," said Wulfhere uneasily; his mythology did not include satyrs.

"Well," snapped Cormac, "the thing lies upon the flags within; follow me, and I will prove to you whether I am mad."

He turned and strode through the columns, and Wulfhere followed, axe ready, his Vikings trailing behind him in close formation and going warily. They passed between the columns, which were plain and without ornamentation of any kind, and entered the temple. Here they found themselves within a broad hall flanked with squat pillars of black stone—and these indeed were carved. A squat figure squatted on the top of each, as upon a pedestal, but in the dim light it was impossible to make out what sort of beings these figures represented, though there was an abhorrent

hint of abnormality about each shape.

"Well," said Wulfhere impatiently, "where is your monster?"

"There he fell," said Cormac, pointing with his sword, "and—by the black gods!"

The flags lay bare.

"Moon-mist and madness," said Wulfhere, shaking his head. "Celtic superstition. You see ghosts, Cormac!"

"Yes?" snapped the badgered Gael. "Who saw a troll on the beacon of Helgoland and roused the whole camp with shouts and bellowings? Who kept the band under arms all night and kept men feeding the fires till they nearly dropped, to scare away the things of darkness?"

Wulfhere growled uncomfortably and glared at his warriors as if to challenge anyone to laugh.

"Look," said Cormac, bending closer. On the tiling was a wide smear of blood, freshly spilt. Wulfhere took a single glance and then straightened quickly, glaring into the shadows. His men bunched closer, facing outward, beards a-bristle. A tense silence reigned.

"Follow me," said Cormac in a low tone, and they pressed close at his heels as he walked warily down the broad corridor. Apparently no entrance opened between the brooding, evil pillars. Ahead of them the shadows paled and they came forth into a broad

circular chamber with a domed ceiling. Around this chamber were more pillars, regularly spaced, and in the light that flowed somehow through the dome the warriors saw the nature of those pillars and the shapes that crowned them. Cormac swore between his teeth and Wulfhere spat. The figures were human, and not even the most perverse and degenerate geniuses of decadent Greece and later Rome could have conceived such obscenities or breathed into the tortured stone such foul life. Cormac scowled. Here and there in the sculpturing the unknown artists had struck a cord of unrealness—a hint of abnormality beyond any human deformity. These touches roused in him a vague uneasiness, a crawling, shuddersome half-fear that lurked white-maned and grisly at the back of his mind...

The thought that he had briefly entertained, that he had seen and slain an hallucination, vanished.

Besides the doorway through which they had entered the chamber, four other portals showed—narrow, arched doorways, apparently without doors. There was no altar visible. Cormac strode to the center of the dome and looked up; its shadowy hollow arched above him, sullen and brooding. His gaze sought the floor on which he stood and he noted the pattern—of tiling rather than flags, and laid in a design the lines of which converged to the center of the floor. The focus of

that design was a single, broad, octagonal slab on which he was standing...

Then, even as he realized that he was standing on that slab, it fell away silently from under his feet and he felt himself plunging into an abyss beneath.

Only the Gael's superhuman quickness saved him. Thorfinn Jarl's-bane was standing nearest him and, as the Gael dropped, he shot out a long arm and clutched at the Dane's sword-belt. The desperate fingers missed, but closed on the scabbard—and, as Thorfinn instinctively braced his legs, Cormac's fall was checked and he swung suspended, life hanging on the grip of his single hand and the strength of the scabbard loops. In an instant Thorfinn had seized his wrist, and Wulfhere, leaping forward with a roar of alarm, added the grasp of his huge hand. Between them they heaved the Gael up out of the gaping blackness, Cormac aiding them with a twist and a lift of his rangy form that swung his legs up over the brink.

"Thor's blood!" ejaculated Wulfhere, more shaken by the experience than was Cormac. "It was touch and go then... By Thor, you still hold your sword!"

"When I drop it, life will no longer be in me," said Cormac. "I mean to carry it into hell with me. But let me look into this gulf that opened beneath me so suddenly."

"More traps may fall," said Wulfhere uneasily.

"I see the sides of the well," said Cormac, leaning and peering, "but my gaze is swiftly swallowed in darkness... What a foul stench drifts up from below!"

"Come away," said Wulfhere hurriedly. "That stench was never born of earth. This well must lead into some Roman Hades—or mayhap the cavern where the serpent drips venom on Loki."

Cormac paid no heed. "I see the trap now," said he. "That slab was balanced on a sort of pivot, and here is the catch that supported it. How it was worked I can't say, but this catch was released and the slab fell, held on one side by the pivot..."

His voice trailed away. Then he said, suddenly: "Blood—blood on the edge of the pit!"

"The thing you slashed," grunted Wulfhere. "It has crawled into the gulf."

"Not unless dead things crawl," growled Cormac. "I killed it, I tell you. It was carried here and thrown in. Listen!"

The warriors bent close; from somewhere far down—an incredible distance, it seemed—there came a sound: a nasty, squashy, wallowing sound, mingled with noises indescribable and unrecognizable.

With one accord the warriors drew away from the well and, exchanging silent glances, gripped their weapons.

"This stone won't burn," growled Wulfhere,

voicing a common thought. "There's no loot here and nothing human. Let's be gone."

"Wait!" The keen-eared Gael threw up his head like a hunting hound. He frowned, and drew nearer to one of the arched openings.

"A human groan," he whispered. "Did you not hear it?"

Wulfhere bent his head, cupping palm to ear. "Aye—down that corridor."

"Follow me," snapped the Gael. "Stay close together. Wulfhere, grip my belt; Hrothgar, hold Wulfhere's, and Hakon, Hrothgar's. There may be more pits. The rest of you dress your shields, and each man keep close touch with the next."

So in a compact mass they squeezed through the narrow portal and found the corridor much wider than they had thought for. There it was darker, but further down the corridor they saw what appeared to be a patch of light.

They hastened to it and halted. Here indeed it was lighter, so that the unspeakable carven obscenities thronging the wall were cast into plain sight. This light came in from above, where the ceiling had been pierced with several openings—and, chained to the wall among the foul carvings, hung a naked form. It was a man who sagged on the chains that held him half erect. At first Cormac thought him dead—and, staring at the grisly mutilations that had been wrought upon

him, decided it was better so. Then the head lifted slightly, and a low moan sighed through the pulped lips.

"By Thor," swore Wulfhere in amazement, "he lives!"

"Water, in God's name," whispered the man on the wall.

Cormac, taking a well-filled flask from Hakon Snorri's son, held it to the creature's lips. The man drank in great, gasping gulps, then lifted his head with a mighty effort. The Gael looked into deep eyes that were strangely calm.

"God's benison on you, my lords," came the voice, faint and rattling, yet somehow suggesting that it had once been strong and resonant. "Has the long torment ended and am I in Paradise at last?"

Wulfhere and Cormac glanced at each other curiously. Paradise! Strange indeed, thought Cormac, would such red-handed reivers as we look in the temple of the humble ones!

"Nay, it is not Paradise," muttered the man deliriously, "for I am still galled by these heavy chains."

Wulfhere bent and examined the chains that held him. Then with a grunt he raised his axe and, shortening his hold upon the haft, smote a short, powerful blow. The links parted beneath the keen edge

and the man slumped forward into Cormac's arms, free of the wall but with the heavy bands still upon wrists and ankles; these, Cormac saw, sank deeply into the flesh which the rough and rusty metal envenomed.

"I think you have not long to live, good sir," said Cormac. "Tell us how you are named and where your village is, so it may be we might tell your people of your passing."

"My name is Fabricus, my lord," said the victim, speaking with difficulty. "My town is any which still holds the Saxon at bay."

"You are a Christian, by your words," said Cormac, and Wulfhere gazed curiously.

"I am but a humble priest of God, noble sir," whispered the other. "But you must not linger. Leave me here and go quickly lest evil befall you."

"By the blood of Odin," snorted Wulfhere, "I quit not this place until I learn who it is that treats living beings so foully!"

"Evil blacker than the dark side of the moon," muttered Fabricus. "Before it, the differences of man fade so that you seem to me like a brother of the blood and of the milk, Saxon."

"I am no Saxon, friend," rumbled the Dane.

"No matter—all men in the rightful form of man are brothers. Such is the word of the Lord—which I had not fully comprehended until I came to this place of abominations!"

"Thor!" muttered Wulfhere. "Is this no Druidic temple?"

"Nay," answered the dying man, "not a temple where men, even in heathenness, deify the cleaner forms of Nature. Ah, God—they hem me close! Avaunt, foul demons of the Outer Dark—creeping, creeping—crawling shapes of red chaos and howling madness—slithering, lurking blasphemies that hid like reptiles in the ships of Rome—ghastly beings spawned in the ooze of the Orient, transplanted to cleaner lands, rooting themselves deep in good British soil—oaks older than the Druids, that feed on monstrous things beneath the bloating moon—"

The mutter of delirium faltered and faded, and Cormac shook the priest lightly. The dying man roused as a man waking slowly from deep sleep.

"Go, I beg of you," he whispered. "They have done their worst to me. But you—they will lap you round with evil spells—they will break your body as they have shattered mine—they will seek to break your souls as they had broken mine but for my everlasting faith in our good Lord God. He will come, the monster, the high priest of infamy, with his legions of the damned—listen!" The dying head lifted. "Even now he comes! Now may God protect us all!"

Cormac snarled like a wolf and the great Viking wheeled about, rumbling defiance like a lion at bay. Aye, something was coming down one of the smaller

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corridors which opened into that wider one. There was a myriad rattling of hoofs on the tiling—"Close the ranks!" snarled Wulfhere. "Make the shield-wall, wolves, and die with your axes red!"

The Vikings quickly formed into a half-moon of steel, surrounding the dying priest and facing outward, just as a hideous horde burst from the dark opening into the comparative light. In a flood of black madness and red horror their assailants swept upon them. Most of them were goat-like creatures, that ran upright and had human hands and faces frightfully partaking of both goat and human. But among their ranks were shapes even more fearful. And behind them all, luminous with an evil light in the darkness of the winding corridor from which the horde emerged, Cormac saw an unholy countenance, human, yet more and less than human. Then on that solid iron wall the noisome horde broke.

The creatures were unarmed, but they were horned, fanged and taloned. They fought as beasts fight, but with less of the beast's cunning and skill. And the Vikings, eyes blazing and beards a-bristle with the battle-lust, swung their axes in mighty strokes of death. Girding horn, slashing talon and gnashing fang found flesh and drew blood in streams, but protected by their helmets, mail and over-lapping shields, the Danes suffered comparatively little while their whistling axes and stabbing spears took ghastly

toll among their unprotected assailants.

"Thor and the blood of Thor," cursed Wulfhere, cleaving a goat-thing clear through the body with a single stroke of his red axe, "mayhap ye find it a harder thing to slay armed men than to torture a naked priest, spawn of Helheim!"

Before that rain of hacking steel the hell-horde broke, but behind them the half-seen man among the shadows drove them back to the onslaught with strange chanting words, unintelligible to the humans who strove against his vassals. So his creatures turned again to the fray with desperate fury, until the dead things lay piled high about the feet of their slayers, and the few survivors broke and fled down the corridor. The Vikings would have scattered in pursuit but Wulfhere's bellow halted them. But as the horde broke, Cormac bounded across the sprawling corpses and raced down the winding corridor in pursuit of one who fled before him. His quarry turned up another corridor and finally raced out into the domed main chamber, and there he turned at bay—a tall man with inhuman eyes and a strange, dark face, naked but for fantastic ornaments.

With his strange short, curved sword he sought to parry the Gael's headlong attack—but Cormac in his red fury drove his foe before him like a straw before the wind. Whatever else this high priest might be, he was mortal, for he winced and cursed in a weird tongue as

Cormac's long lean blade broke through his guard again and again and brought blood from head, chest and arm. Back Cormac drove him, inexorably, until he wavered on the very brink of the open pit—and there, as the Gael's point girded into his breast, he reeled and fell backward with a wild cry . . .

For a long moment that cry rang up ever more faintly from untold depths—then ceased abruptly. And far below rose sounds as of a grisly feast. Cormac smiled fiercely. For the moment, not even the inhuman sounds from the gulf could shake him in his grim fury; he was the Avenger, and he had just sent a tormentor of one of his own kind to the maw of a devouring god of judgement . . .

He turned and strode back down the hall to join Wulfhere and his men. A few goat-things passed before him in the dim corridors, but fled bleating before his grim advance. Cormac paid them no heed, and presently rejoined Wulfhere and the dying priest.

"You have slain the Dark Druid," whispered Fabricus. "Aye, his blood stains your blade—I see it glowing even through your sheath, though others cannot, and so I know I am free at last to speak. Before the Romans, before the true Celtic Druids, before the Gaels and the Picts, even, was the Dark Druid—the Teacher of Man. So he styled himself, for he was the last of the Serpent-Men, the last of that race that preceded humanity in dominion over the world. His was

the hand that gave to Eve the apple, and set Adam's foot upon the accursed path of awakening. King Kull of Atlantis slew the last of His brethren with the edge of the sword in desperate conflict, but He alone survived to ape the form of man and hand down the Satanic lore of olden times. I see many things now—things that life hid but which the opening doors of death reveal! Before Man were the Serpent-men, and before them were the Old Ones of the Star-shaped heads, who created mankind and, later, the abominable goat-spawn when they realized Man would not serve their purpose. This temple is the last Outpost of their accursed civilization to remain above ground—and beneath it ravages the last Shoggoth to remain near the surface of this world. The goat-spawn roam the hills only at night, fearful now of man, and the Old Ones and the Shoggoths hide deep beneath the earth till that day when God mayhap shall call them forth to be his scourge, at Armageddon..."

The old man coughed and gasped, and Cormac's skin prickled strangely. Too many of the things Fabricus said seemed to stir strange memories in his Gaelic racial soul.

"Rest easy, old man," he said. "This temple—this *Outpost,* as you call it, shall not remain standing."

"Aye," grunted Wulfhere, strangely moved. "Every stone in this place shall be cast into the pit that lies beneath!"

Cormac, too, felt an unaccustomed sadness—why he knew not, for often had he seen death before. "Christian or no, your's is a brave soul, old man. You shall be avenged . . ."

"Nay!" Fabricus held up a trembling, bloodless hand; his face seemed to shine with a mystic intensity. "I die, and vengeance means naught to my departing soul. I came to this evil place bearing the cross and speaking the cleansing words of our Lord, willing to die if only this world might be purged of that Dark One who has so foully slain so many and who plotted the Second Downfall of us all. And God has answered my prayers, for He has sent you here and you have slain the Serpent; now the Serpent's goat-minions can but flee to the wooded hills, and the Shoggoth return to the dark bowels of Hell whence it came." Fabricus gripped Cormac's right hand with his left, Wulfhere's with his right; then he said: "Gael—Norseman—fellow humans you be, though of different races, different beliefs . . . Look, now!" His countenance seemed to shine with a strange light as he feebly raised himself on one elbow. "It is as our Lord told me—all differences between us pale before the menace of the Dark Powers—aye, we be all brothers . . ."

Then the mystic, far-seeing eyes of Fabricus rolled upward and closed—in death. Cormac stood in grim silence, gripping his naked sword, then drew

breath deeply and relaxed.

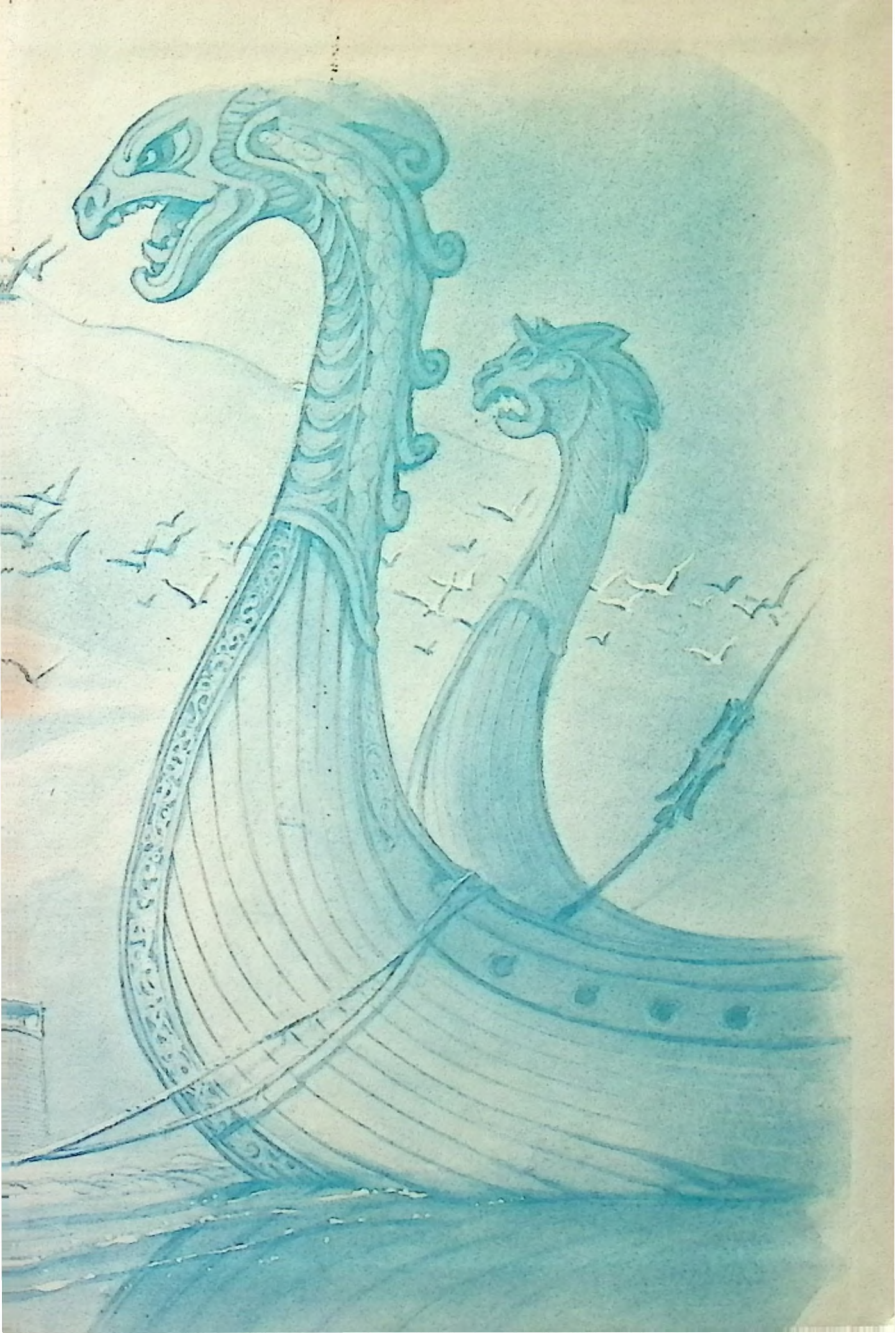
"What meant the man?" he grunted at last.

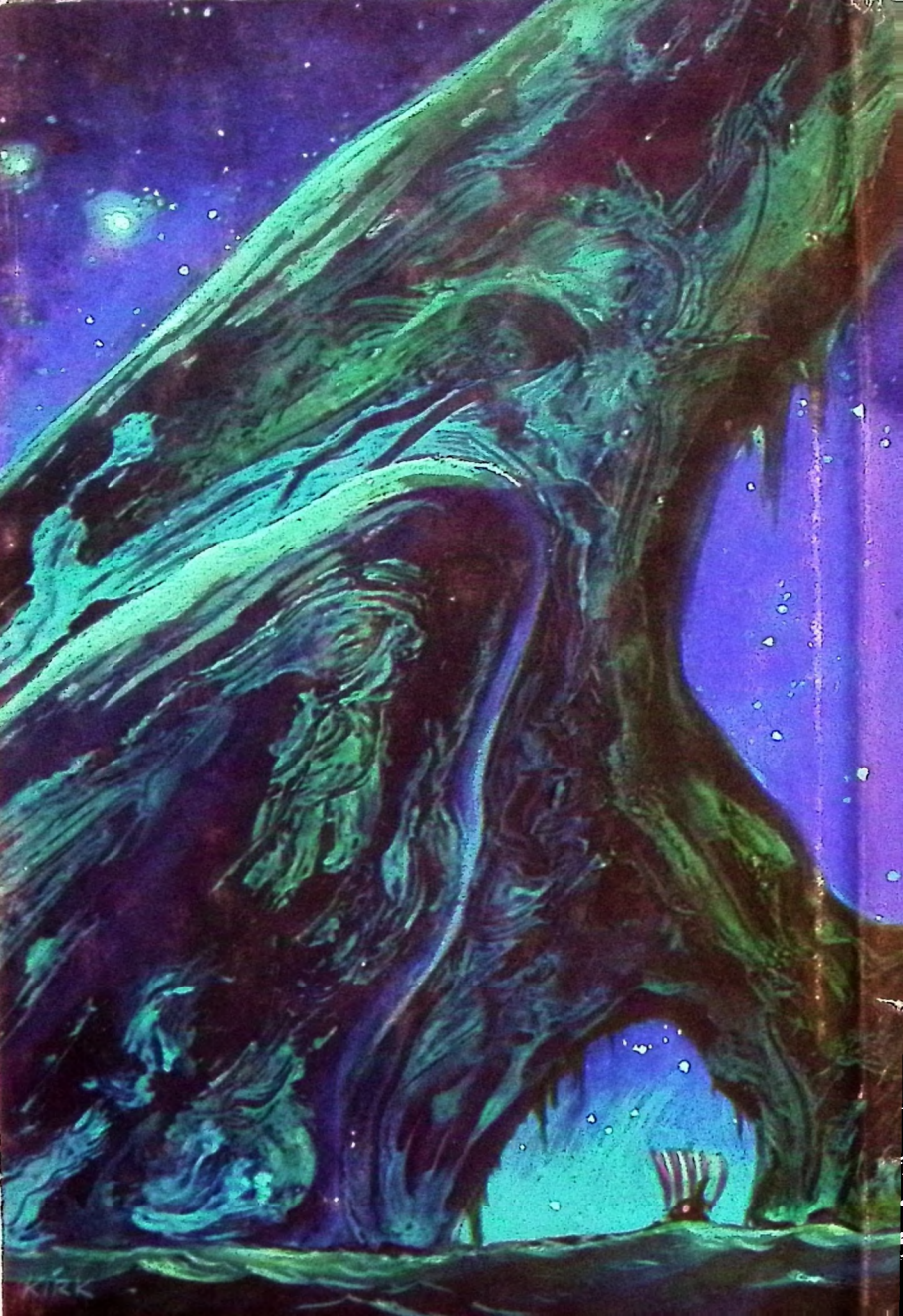
Wulfhere shook his shaggy mane. "I know not. He was mad, and his madness led him to his doom. Yet he had courage, for did he not go forth fearless, even as goes the berserker into battle, careless of death? He was a brave man—but this temple is an evil place that were better quitted . . ."

"Aye—and the sooner the better!"

Cormac sheathed his sword with a clang; again he breathed deeply.

"On to Wessex," he growled. "We'll clean our steel in good Saxon blood."

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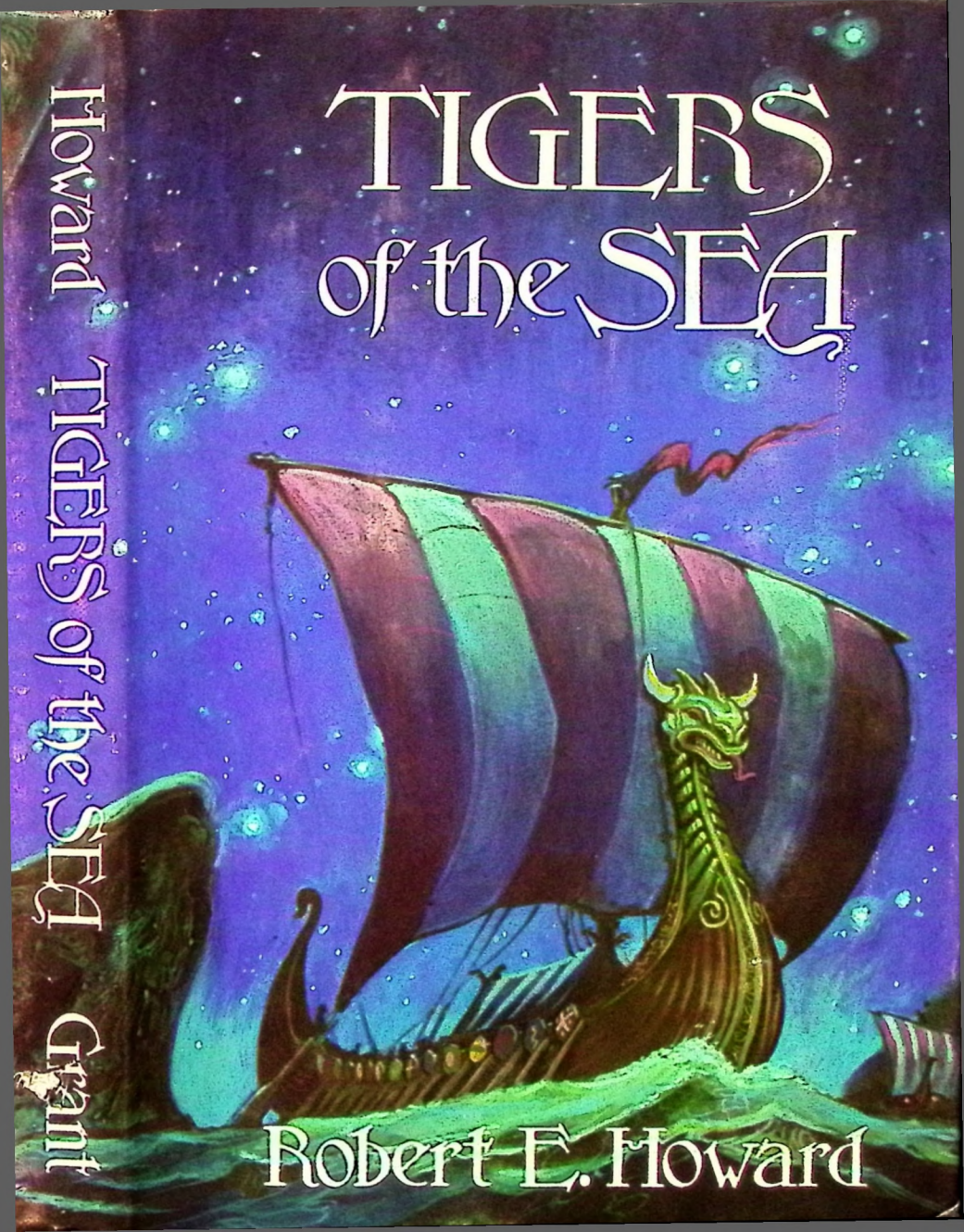
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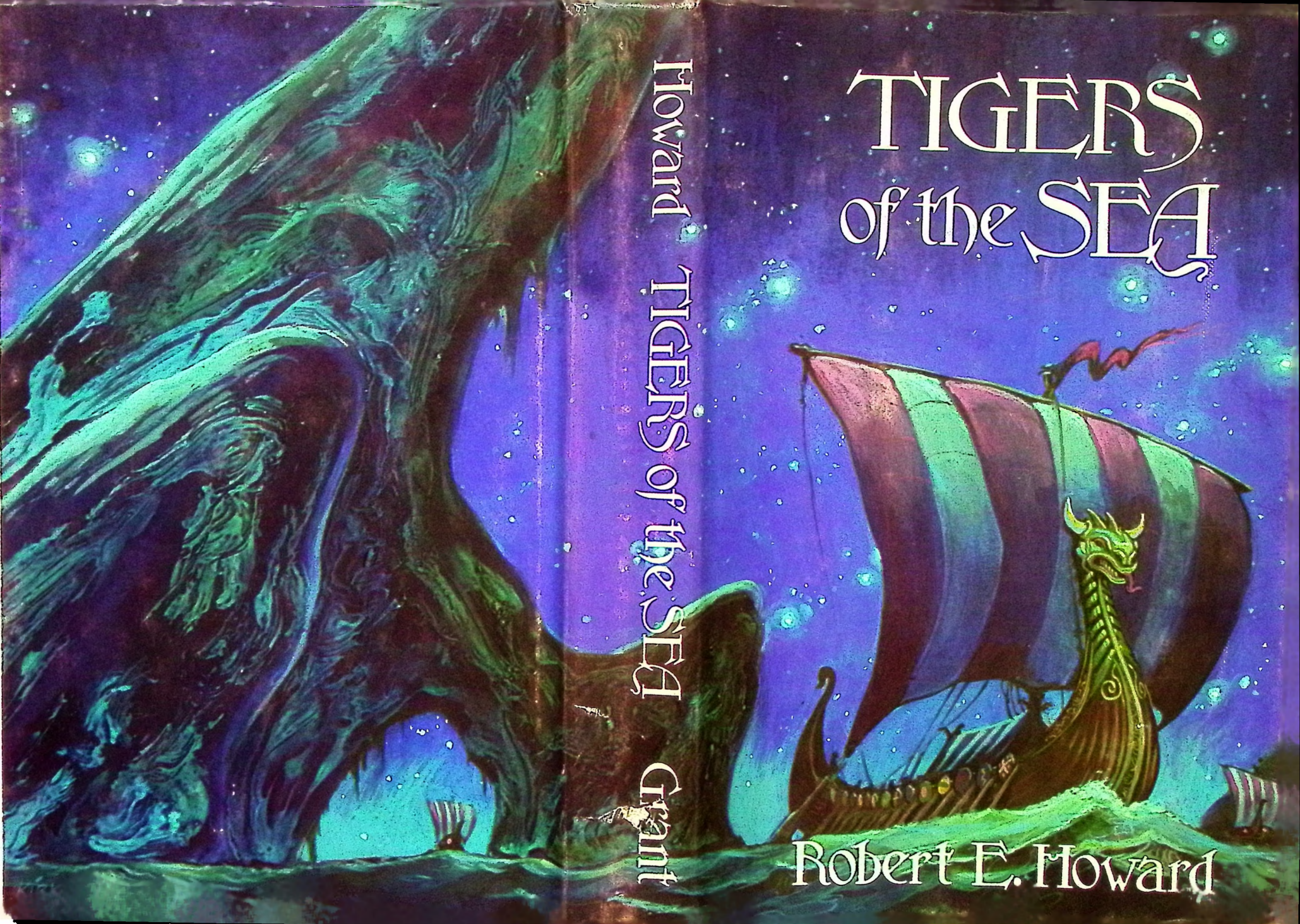
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